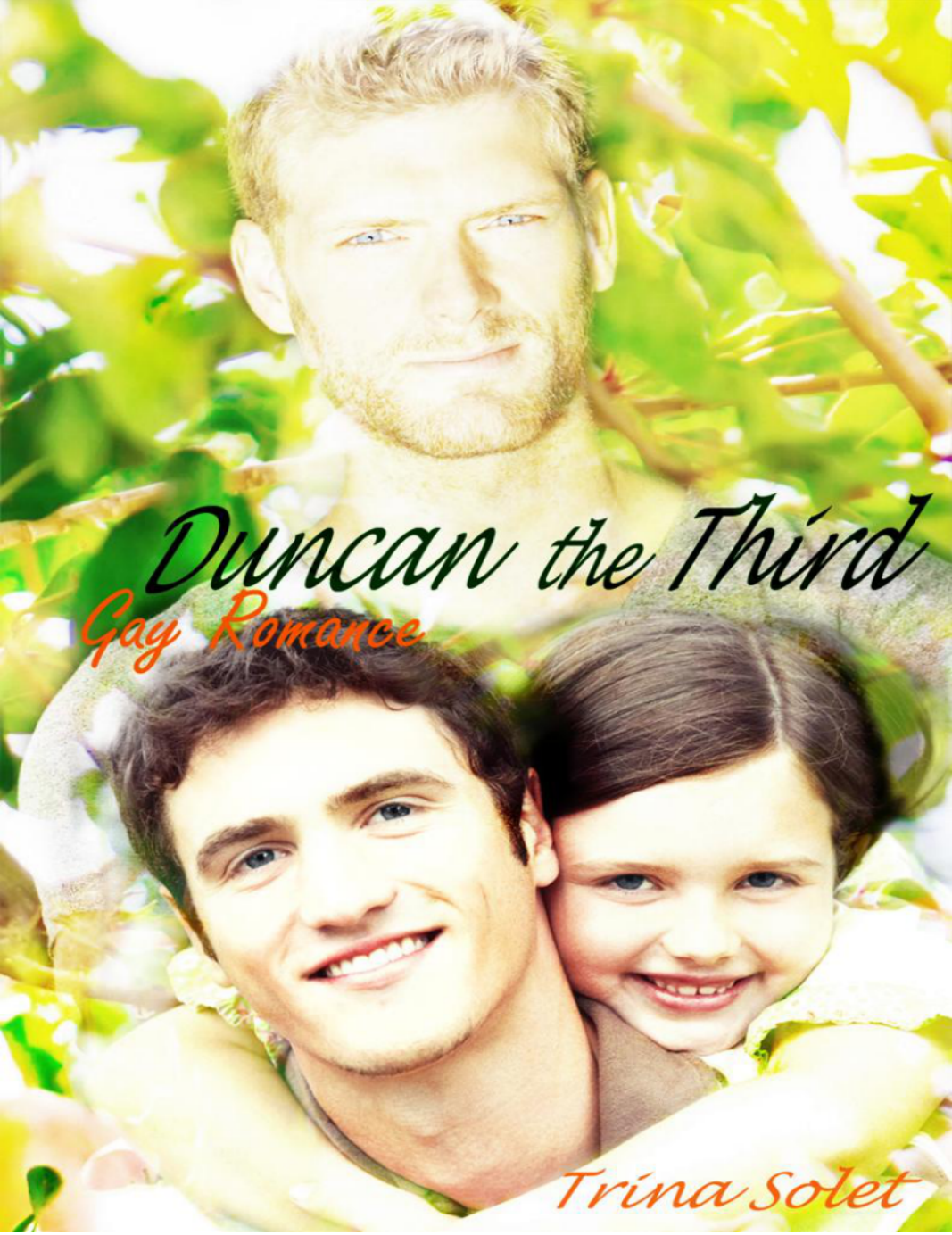
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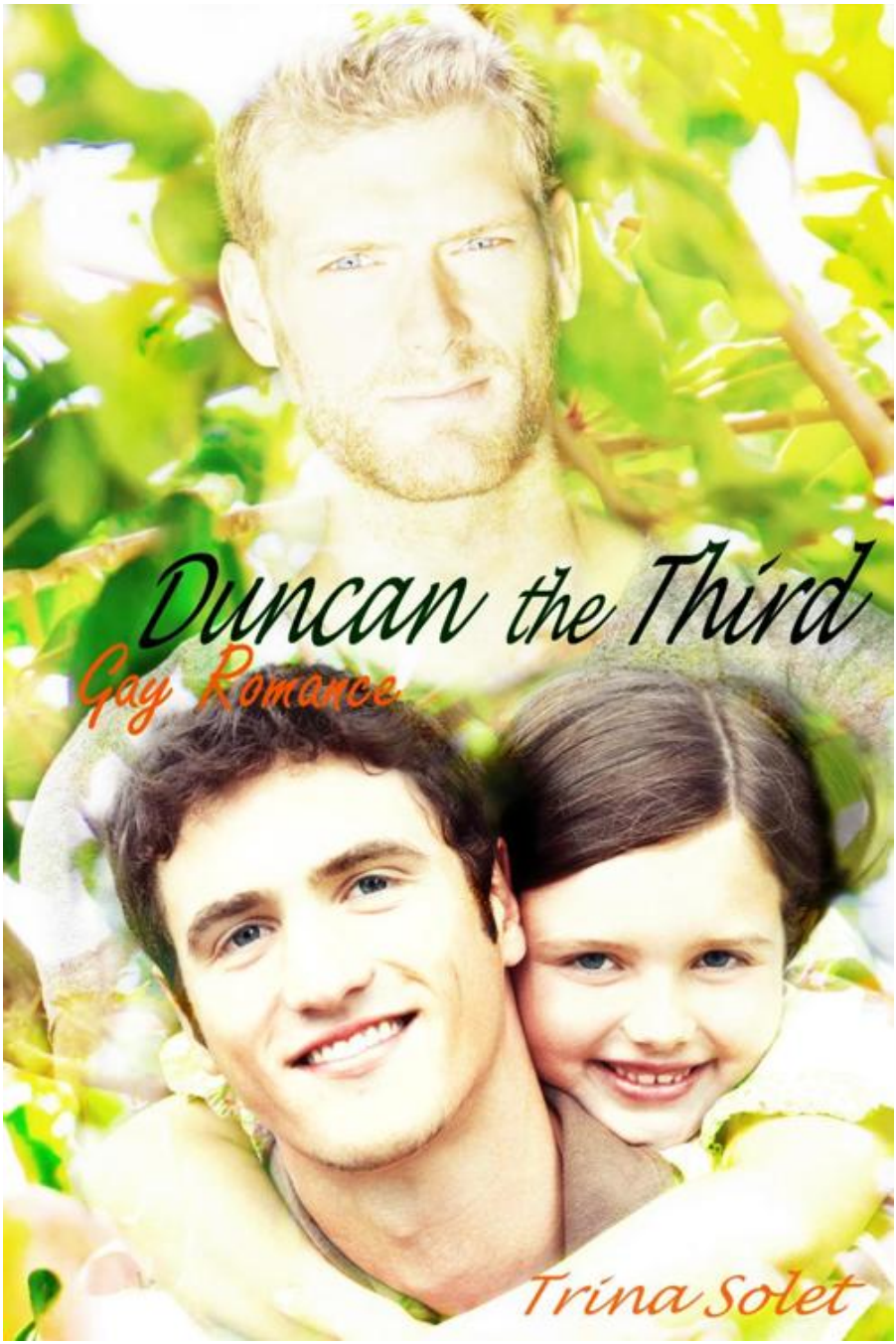
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Duncan the Third: Gay Romance

By Trina Solet

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Duncan the Third

Gay Romance

By Trina Solet

Chapter 1

Saturday morning, as he made coffee, Duncan heard the commotion outside his door. He vaguely remembered that someone would be moving into the vacant apartment down the hall. As the noise faded, Duncan looked out the window. He could see a rented moving van parked along the curb in front. It sat under the trees that lined the sidewalk. There would probably be more noise as furniture was carried in by amateurs yelling at each other. At least it would break up the monotony of his day.

All his days seemed interchangeable and gray. After the breakup with Jason, Duncan found it difficult to get himself going in the morning, but weekends were much worse. There was no reason to get out of bed. He would have rather been at work, not contemplating another empty weekend. Months ago, he had put Melissa in charge of the store in the evenings and on weekends. He had promoted her so he could spend more time with Jason. Now there was no point to all that free time he had given himself, but he couldn't demote Melissa just because he had nothing to do. She worked hard to put herself through grad school. She shouldn't have to suffer because of his disastrous love life. Unfortunately, with her in charge, there wasn't much for Duncan to do at the store. Whenever he went in on his days off, he kind of felt in the way. Plus Melissa gave him those compassionate looks. It was like she was telling him, "I know you're lonely and you need to keep busy so you don't think about Jason. I understand." Imagining that look was enough to keep him out of her way.

Now Duncan had to force himself to get through two empty days. Looking forward to Monday and wishing that the weekend was over were sure signs that he was in pretty bad shape. He didn't even care if the new neighbors were noisy and obnoxious. It was hard to make himself care about anything.

The coffee was just starting to brew, filling the air with its welcome aroma. While he waited for the coffeemaker to finish, Duncan noticed that the space on the side table that should be covered with junk mail was empty. That meant he forgot to bring in the mail Friday. Key in hand, Duncan went down to the mailboxes.

As he walked out of the elevator, Duncan saw a young guy and a girl around eight or nine trying to rig the double doors to the building to stay open. One door was already open, but the other one was missing the little leg that folds down.

"Use your sneaker," the girl said. She had dark hair and blue eyes as did the young man. Duncan thought they might be brother and sister.

"Give me your sneaker," the young guy said to her.

"No."

"Exactly. Look for something we can jam in here," he told her.

As the girl went outside, Duncan noticed a catalog in the bundle of mail waiting in his mailbox.

"This might work," Duncan said to the young man and offered him the catalog.

"Hey, thanks," the guy said and smiled up at him. He had amazing, dark blue eyes and an infectious smile. Damn. While trying to hide his flustered reaction, Duncan folded up the catalog and wedged it under the door. The young guy stood up, still smiling. He looked to be in his early twenties with a good, strong build.

"Are we going to be neighbors?" he asked Duncan. He sounded hopeful.

"If you're moving in. I'm on the fourth floor."

"We are neighbors! That's great." He then pointed at the rented van parked in front. "That's us. All our worldly possessions. We're just waiting for some friends so we can lug that stuff in."

"If you need an extra pair of hands, I'm free," Duncan said.

For a second the guy just stared.

"You're volunteering to help me move?" He sounded incredulous.

"I have an empty weekend ahead of me." Duncan shrugged. He probably shouldn't admit to that, but he had never been good at pretending.

"Have all your electronic devices died simultaneously?" the young guy asked, still finding it hard to believe that anyone would rather help him move than do anything else.

"I'm having second thoughts about offering my help." Duncan liked the idea of feeling useful, but not if this guy was going to make him feel like a complete loser about it.

"Sorry, but I had to threaten and bribe my friends to help out. Free lunch and helping you move at some future, unspecified date, that's what you just got yourself in exchange."

"I'll probably take you up on both," Duncan told him.

"It's a deal," he said, and they shook on it. "By the way, I'm Patrick."

Hearing the name only as background noise to his beating heart, Duncan had to remind himself to breathe. From his hand, he felt Patrick's warm, firm grip travel all through him and take hold of his

dick. Damn, it was that easy to break his composure. All it took was a pair of blue eyes, an open, smiling face, dark hair, and a body made to be stripped naked. Even as he was painfully reminded of Jason's blue eyes and blond hair, his slimmer frame, Duncan couldn't shake off the effects of this other young guy. Maybe that was because he was right in front of him, unlike Jason, who was probably in the arms of some other man.

Just then Duncan realized that he hadn't introduced himself. That's probably why Patrick was staring at him with that expectant smile.

"No. Not him. No. He's no good," the dark haired young girl said as she walked back into the lobby. She looked from Patrick to Duncan with disapproval.

"Honey..." Patrick started to say.

"No. You can't have him," she insisted. "I found someone better. Come on." She tried to pull Patrick away.

"I'm talking to our neighbor," Patrick told her, not letting her budge him one inch away from Duncan.

"Then it's OK," she said, letting go.

"She thought you were hitting on me," Patrick explained.

"You must get that a lot," Duncan said. It was a safe bet that guys were all over him.

"Not nearly enough." After a pause, Patrick said, "That was a hint."

"Are you asking me to hit on you?" Duncan said. He was glad to confirm that his new neighbor was gay even if he wasn't planning to take advantage of that fact.

"Would it kill you to hit on me a little?" Patrick asked.

The girl said, "Don't!"

"Hi. I'm Duncan Jeffries. Welcome to the building," Duncan said instead of making a pass.

For some reason Patrick looked surprised.

"Seriously? I'm Patrick Duncan, and this is my sister, Wendy Duncan. Hear that? He's a Duncan too," he said to his sister.

"Huh! Neat," she said looking at Duncan with a little more interest and approval now, but something more important was distracting her. She turned to her brother. "Come quick. I found a good one. Come on, hurry."

"A what?" Patrick asked.

"A cute guy for you," Wendy said. She was pulling on his arm again.

"Don't let me keep you," Duncan said as Patrick looked back at him.

"Don't you want to see what she considers a good one?" Patrick said,

not moving.

"OK," Duncan agreed. He was a little curious.

"No, Patrick," Wendy objected. "He'll steal him."

"If he steals him then it wasn't meant to be," Patrick told her mock-seriously.

As they went out onto the sidewalk, Duncan wasn't surprised that he wasn't a good candidate. He knew he didn't look like much, especially on a Saturday morning when he hadn't even done one thing to make himself presentable. Patrick didn't seem to mind his lack of effort. Maybe he liked the unkempt look.

After a few steps, Wendy pointed out a young guy who was leaning against an SUV parked a little further away. The guy she was pointing at was busy on his phone and didn't notice them. With longish, light brown hair swept to the side and a striped green and white hoodie, he was adorable but obviously too young even for Patrick.

"That's what she likes. I can't say I'm surprised," Duncan said. At thirty-four, he definitely couldn't compete with that.

"Wendy, go ask him how old he is," Patrick told his sister.

As she ran off, Duncan was alarmed.

"You encourage her to talk to strange guys?"

"I'm supervising," Patrick said. Then he told him, "I know him."

Wendy went eagerly but came back crestfallen.

"He's no good," she said.

"Why?" Patrick asked her though he obviously already knew.

"He's jailbait," she said, pouting.

Duncan burst out laughing.

"It's not funny," Wendy told him as they all walked back to the rented van. "He was really cute."

"We'll find someone better," Patrick told her. He was busy unlocking the back of the van.

"But not him," she said indicating Duncan.

"Can Duncan and I just be friends?" Patrick said.

She thought hard about that, she frowned then decided.

"If you have to."

"I think we do," Patrick said with a smirk. He looked over at Duncan in a disconcerting way that made him want to strip Patrick, shove his beautiful body into the nearest hard surface and kiss the hell out of him to start with. Duncan held his breath and tried to keep his face

neutral. The last thing he wanted to do was encourage Patrick by letting him see how attracted he was to him.

Patrick opened the back of the van and then drew back daunted by everything that was crammed in there.

"The lady lamp!" Wendy said suddenly and went to the passenger side of the van. She got something out carefully then told Patrick she was going to take it upstairs. She went up carrying a box with a small lamp that had a porcelain figurine as its base with a parasol as the lampshade.

"That's precious to her," Patrick said. "She was cradling it in her lap on the drive over to keep it safe. It was our mom's. Our dad bought it at some flea market and brought it home proudly for Mom. Mom thought it was hideous at first. But the longer it sat on her bedside table, the more she fell in love with it."

From the way Patrick spoke about his parents, Duncan could tell that something had happened to them.

Patrick now pointed back up the street. The cute young guy Wendy had discovered was walking toward them along with a young man a little older than him. The older one had the same light brown hair, but his was cut in a more conservative style.

"That's some of my moving help. It's Cory and his brother, Ben. Come on, I'll introduce you," Patrick said.

They all shook hands, Ben only after his older brother clapped him on the back. Though he wore glasses and looked in every way like a nerd, Cory seemed more energetic and physically fit than his younger brother.

"You work fast," Cory said to Patrick as they went to the back of the van. He looked at Duncan like he was impressed by what he saw. Duncan couldn't imagine what he could find impressive about him.

"Yeah, but I can't get Wendy's seal of approval," Patrick said as he lifted a box.

"I saw her trying to recruit useless Ben over here," Cory said of his brother.

Hearing this, Ben tried to walk back where he came from. He did it without a word and without looking away from his phone or changing his expression. Cory grabbed the hood of his hoodie and dragged him back.

"Thanks for coming, Ben," Patrick said to him. "But you'll need to carry something other than your phone if you want me to feed you. Grab a box," he told him. After Ben reluctantly put away his phone, Patrick handed him the box he was holding.

Boxes were blocking everything else in the van so they went up first. The friends who had helped load the van were supposed to come by, but they were late. Patrick texted them as they stacked the elevator with boxes. Seeing that the cardboard flaps had labels in a very neat but childish hand, Duncan guessed they were labeled by Wendy.

When the elevator doors opened on the fourth floor, Wendy was waiting at the door of the apartment.

"He can't come in," she said blocking the door. She was talking about Ben. "He's jailbait."

"Who is she, the bouncer?" Ben said as he set down the box he was carrying. "Here, have a look." He pulled out his ID.

"Put away your fake ID, Ben," Cory told him coming up behind them.

"Wendy, that's Ben. He's Cory's brother. I told you they're helping us move," Patrick reminded her.

"He's already out of school so he's staying with me for the summer," Cory said and kissed Wendy on the cheek as he went in.

As Wendy let Ben in reluctantly, Duncan looked around at their apartment. Bare, it looked a lot like his. Wendy bustled around trying to figure out where things should go based on some hand-drawn plans on a legal pad.

"I guess you're in charge," Duncan said.

Hearing that, she looked kind of scared.

"We can only bring in one thing at a time so don't worry about it," her brother reassured her.

As Duncan was setting down a box according to directions from Wendy, she showed him the lamp she had carried up earlier.

"That was Mom's. Dad gave it to her. When I was little, I always wanted to play with it. And one time when I was sick, Mom brought it into my room and left it on all night to keep me company." She looked sad, and Duncan again wondered what had happened to their parents.

Seeing that he was just standing there, Wendy sent him back to work. Later, when she caught him smiling at Patrick over a dresser they carried into the bedroom, she warned him, "Don't you get any ideas, Duncan the Third."

"I won't. Just friends," Duncan vowed, more for his own benefit than hers.

"OK. We can be friends too," she said to him. "You work hard. You're not lazy like Jailbait."

Ben did do a minimum of work and a maximum of texting.

"Don't call me that!" Ben told her. "And this is what free moving help looks like. You want better, hire some big, burly men to heft your stuff."

"He has important texts to attend to," Cory said as he came through carrying a small table with the help of another of Patrick's friends.

Duncan noticed that his friends were all college kids except for Cory who was only a little older. Being in his mid thirties, Duncan felt old in their midst. That didn't stop Patrick from giving him a come hither look whenever he got the chance. It was good for Duncan's ego, but not for his peace of mind.

Though they weren't well organized, and they took an extra long break for lunch, everything made it up to the apartment eventually. As Patrick's friends cleared out, Duncan thought he should do the same so Patrick and Wendy could finish unpacking.

"You're not leaving too, are you?" Wendy asked.

"He helped enough, honey," Patrick told her. To Duncan he said, "Thank you for pitching in. I definitely owe you one."

"It's no problem. As I told you, I had nothing better to do."

"Then you can stay," Wendy jumped in to say.

Patrick looked at Duncan.

"I think you've done enough, but if you want to hang out while we unpack and help us order dinner, that would be great."

Ignoring the voice in his head that told him to leave right now, Duncan accepted Patrick's low-key invitation. He helped Patrick shift some of the furniture that wasn't in the right place while Wendy was in the kitchen unpacking the food. As a reward for the extra work, Duncan got to watch Patrick's muscles flex as he worked. The words beautiful and dangerous alternated in his mind as did the warning "He's all wrong because he's just right."

As he ogled him amidst mental confusion, Duncan almost missed that Patrick was asking him where he worked.

"I practically work where I live. I own a little kitchenware store right around the corner. The Copper Kettle. Not my idea. It already had that name when I bought it," he said defensively.

"You must be into cooking," Patrick said.

"Only a little bit. It was just a good business opportunity. I wanted to own my own business, and the place had a lot of potential."

"I'll make sure to check it out," Patrick said.

Now Duncan wanted to know more about him.

"Most of your friends are in college, what about you?" Duncan asked him. He had heard the rest of them mention classes, but Patrick only said a few things about work.

"I had to quit. I needed a full time job after our parents died. My job title is Resources Coordinator at the Bartley Hotel. There are a couple of us. I mainly deal with people arranging special events, conferences, corporate events, that kind of thing."

"Not weddings?" Duncan said since that was the kind of event he imagined a hotel might be used for.

"Not at the Bartley. It isn't exactly pretty. It's functional, geared toward business types. It's designed to make people who work in cubicles feel right at home."

"Sounds lovely."

"I know, but it pays the bills. It was scary at first when I realized I had to support myself and Wendy. Cory helped me get the job at the hotel. He's like my big brother. He took me under his wing in my first year of college. I was sure we'd lose touch when he graduated, but Cory didn't let that happen. And he was there during the worst time in my life."

"He seems capable," Duncan said. "The only one who was more take-charge was Wendy."

"I consider him the perfect nerd role model for Wendy," Patrick said.

"I think you're a good role model yourself. Though Wendy seems like more of a leader than a follower."

"She's a bossy little thing," Patrick agreed.

Just then Wendy proved her bossiness by calling them into the kitchen to put away the things that went on the top shelves.

Duncan took care of ordering dinner from a place that made amazing panini. It seemed like the right thing after a day of moving. Wendy was so enthusiastic about them, Duncan decided a panini press would be a perfect housewarming gift for their new home. As he sat down with them to eat in that ramshackle kitchen, he felt so good that the feeling scared him. Then Patrick's knee brushed his under the small kitchen table, and Duncan shuddered. He again hoped Patrick didn't notice how strongly Duncan reacted to every touch from him. Patrick was telling Wendy how Ben tripped over the front step then got mad and stomped on it. Wendy laughed, but she admitted that she got mad at things that tripped her up too.

Patrick reminded Wendy that her room had to be put in order next since she would be going to bed first. Realizing that after her bedtime,

he might be left alone with Patrick, Duncan decided it was time to go. When he left them, Patrick was helping Wendy unpack a few things that would make her room cozy for when she went to sleep. Duncan looked around one last time before he went out the door. Now that it wasn't empty, this apartment seemed nothing like his own. It had warmth and life even though here and there he could see treasured mementos of lost parents. Somehow, even those sad reminders made the place more alive. But mostly it was Patrick and Wendy. They made Duncan wish that he didn't have to leave.

As he walked into the safe haven of his dark apartment, Duncan knew leaving wasn't enough. After almost the whole day spent together, Patrick was too much with him. Turning on the light in the hallway, Duncan blinked at the sudden glare and saw a vision of Patrick smiling at him, taking sweet possession of him, telling him it was too late to run.

Chapter 2

Sunday morning, Patrick woke up a little sore but pretty damn happy. He owed his good mood to their new neighbor. His head was filled with those blue-gray eyes like the sky on a cold day, but so beautiful and kind of sad. They alone made Patrick want to kiss his serious mouth until there was no trace of sadness there, only lust for him. Patrick groaned because Duncan wasn't right there to kiss and maul, but then he smiled again at the thought that he was right across the hall.

As he sat up in bed and threw the covers off, Patrick tried to think about the last guy that had him waking up with a smile in addition to the hard-on. Since his parents' death almost two years ago, Patrick hadn't felt a strong attraction for any man. Sure there was a flicker now and then, but this thing Duncan stirred up in him was a lot more than that. He couldn't believe his luck. Such a great guy was only a few steps from his front door. Patrick would have to make sure they ran into each other a lot.

As he got up, Patrick could hear Wendy puttering around. The new place still needed straightening up, but a more pressing problem weighed on Patrick's mind. Wendy needed somewhere to go after school on Monday. She used to stay with Mr. and Mrs. Ortiz, the retired couple who owned their old apartment building. They liked having Wendy around and let her play with their two little dogs. When they sold the building, Patrick had to find a new apartment and something for Wendy to do after school as well. He thought he had a solution when he found an after school program that would accept her even though the school year was so close to being over. Then it turned out there was a miscommunication, and she wasn't accepted after all. Since Cory's brother wasn't busy, Patrick called to ask him if he could stay with Wendy after school.

"Babysitting?" Ben said when Cory put him on.

Patrick could hear him making a face.

"Come over, hang out. It's not like you have to change her diapers," Patrick told him.

"Patrick!" Wendy objected, having overheard him. She came over to hang on his arm and eavesdrop.

"Only if she stops calling me jailbait," Ben said.

"Never!" Wendy yelled.

"He'll do it," Cory said, getting on the phone. "You want to stay with

me, you'll make yourself useful," he told Ben.

"Thanks guys," Patrick told them. Cory was coming through for him again.

After he gave Ben the specifics and got off the phone, Patrick found Wendy frowning at him.

"Whyyyyy?" she whined.

"It won't be that bad. You thought he was cute when you first saw him," Patrick reminded her.

"That was before I knew he was jailbait. He's useless to us now."

"He's not useless. He's helping us out."

"I told you I can stay by myself," she said.

"I would worry too much, and I wouldn't be able to concentrate at work," he told her. It wasn't always easy to convince her that she was still a little kid.

She sighed, accepting the inevitable.

"You want to walk around and explore the neighborhood," he offered. "We'll see if there's somewhere good to have breakfast."

Wendy agreed enthusiastically.

*

Last night, Duncan had fallen asleep so quickly, exhausted into peaceful, uninterrupted sleep. It was nice not to lie in bed awake, thinking about a man who didn't love him and didn't lose one minute of sleep thinking about him. Though chances were, if he had lost sleep, Duncan would have spent last night obsessing over Patrick not Jason.

Getting out of bed, Duncan noticed that he wasn't a hundred percent. He was sore all over because he wanted to show off for his hot, young neighbor. He would have to watch that. A guy like that living so close, that was temptation coming right to his doorstep. Duncan wondered if he could count on Patrick's little sister to keep them apart.

As he walked through the living room into the kitchen, Duncan thought his apartment looked more drab than usual. Having moved in only a few months ago, Duncan still wasn't used to calling this featureless space his home. It didn't feel like a home, but then no place did. That house by Deerbourne Creek was supposed to be his home, his and Jason's. Now it was just prime real estate. It was only a matter of time before he put it on the market. Unable to live in the house that he was supposed to share with Jason, Duncan had chosen

this apartment simply because it was close to The Copper Kettle. The apartment was just a container, somewhere to put himself.

Just as he was settling down with his cup of coffee and a newspaper, Stacy called. She always checked in with him on weekends and tried to include him in her plans. She was his best friend, and he enjoyed her company but not if socializing with too many people was involved. Some if his other friends made similar efforts to get him out there, some even tried to set him up. Duncan refused most of their offers. He just had to work through this on his own. Stacy mostly understood that.

When he told her that he had helped someone move, she asked him if he was a masochist.

"That's what he said," Duncan told her. He couldn't go without mentioning his new neighbor to her.

"Who?"

"The guy who moved in. A young guy with a little sister."

"A young guy? Ooh, that's hitting your weak spot." Stacy knew Duncan found younger guys irresistible.

"The universe wants me to suffer," Duncan said though being with Patrick certainly hadn't felt like suffering.

"Maybe he'll shake you up and wake you up. Why not let him lick your wounds?" Stacy's voice was just as suggestive as her words.

"I'm still recuperating," Duncan said to cut her off.

"Nothing better for that than a hot, young guy. I speak from experience. He is hot, isn't he?" Stacy asked.

"Very. But I figured out the hard way that my taste in men isn't compatible with what I want in life," Duncan told her. The knowledge was hard-won. He would be a fool to ignore it.

"It seems to me like you've sworn off all men, not just the younger ones," Stacy accused him. Then in a milder voice she urged him, "Just go for it. Let him help you forget Jason and his lies. Have some fun."

"My new neighbor isn't someone you just play around with. His little sister is living with him because they lost their parents. He isn't just some hot young thing, and that means serious potential for hurt."

"OK, I guess he isn't ideal for a quick, soul healing fling," Stacy said. Seeing his point but not giving up, she added, "You can't sit in that little cube forever." As an interior decorator, she had a very low opinion of his nondescript apartment.

"I'll know when I'm ready," Duncan assured her.

"I don't get a vote?"

"No."

After finishing up with Stacy, Duncan stood up with his empty coffee cup in hand and stretched carefully. Other than being sore, Duncan was also at loose ends. With the new neighbor on his mind, it was worse than all the pointless free time he had before. Now he didn't just feel aimless and bored, he felt antsy and confined. He wanted to lurk in the hallway to try to run into Patrick. That was unacceptable behavior especially in a man his age. Even though it wouldn't make Melissa happy, Duncan decided to go to the store. She didn't feel like she was really in charge if he was lurking around, but bothering Melissa was better than going stir crazy and stalking his new neighbor.

As he stepped out the front doors of the building, Duncan ran into Patrick and his sister. What was the universe trying to do to him? Standing on the sidewalk, they looked like they were deciding which way to go. Wendy was the first to notice Duncan.

"Duncan the Third!" she greeted him happily.

As he turned, Patrick gave him a big smile and a quiet "Good morning."

"Don't you ever shave?" Wendy asked, looking at Duncan's beard critically.

"Back off, Wendy. Maybe he likes the scruffy look," Patrick told her.

"But I don't," Wendy said.

"You don't get to decide," Patrick said.

Wendy grumbled and frowned at Duncan's facial hair.

"I was just going to drop in at The Copper Kettle and see if I can make myself useful," Duncan said and pointed in the direction of the store.

Wendy wanted to know what The Copper Kettle was. Once he told her, she said, "Can we go too? Let's go."

"Wait to be invited," Patrick told her.

"It's a store. You don't need to be invited," Duncan told her. Seeing Patrick's expectant look, Duncan said, "But you are welcome to come and see it."

"That's all I'm asking for," Patrick said in a low, teasing voice. "Make me feel wanted."

"You're going to be in trouble if Wendy hears you flirting with me," Duncan warned him.

She didn't because she was walking ahead of them. As they strolled

toward the store, Patrick told Duncan that they were exploring the neighborhood and asked him to recommend a place to eat. Duncan mentioned a few places and suppressed his wish to accompany them. They arrived at The Copper Kettle just then, and Wendy went in first.

"You don't have any customers," Wendy said worriedly when she saw that the store was almost empty.

"It's early. We just opened," Duncan told her. "Feel free to look around."

She looked like she was waiting for him to say that. Dying to poke around, she zipped through the aisles trying to take in everything.

In the meantime, Duncan introduced Patrick to Melissa.

"We have to buy lots of stuff from here," Wendy decided once she got back to her brother.

"That's the kind of customer we like," Melissa told her.

After Duncan introduced the two of them, Arthur, his other employee, came in. Unlike Melissa, who had only widened her eyes briefly when Duncan came in with Patrick, Arthur practically congratulated Duncan and Patrick on their upcoming nuptials. He also slipped in a few references to his own boyfriend as he always did. Not wanting to put up with Arthur's insinuations if he stayed at the store, Duncan offered to take Patrick and Wendy on a tour of the neighborhood. Or he might have done it for other reasons. He just couldn't help it, and seeing Patrick's face brighten at his offer made it more than worth it.

"You can get away?" Patrick said.

"Melissa can handle things here. She's the weekend and evening manager, and she likes me out of her hair," Duncan said loud enough for her to hear.

She gave him an apologetic grin, but she didn't disagree.

First Duncan took them to breakfast at a crepe place that got Wendy's full endorsement.

"I'm guessing you're more of a bacon and eggs man," Duncan said since Patrick ordered a savory crepe with a mushroom and prosciutto filling.

"I default to cereal," Patrick said. "But I'll cook up some eggs when I'm feeling ambitious. And I wouldn't turn up my nose at a pancake or a waffle either."

Unfortunately, talking about what kind of breakfast Patrick liked just made Duncan think unseemly thoughts. After a tiring night of exertion in his arms, a man deserved whatever kind of breakfast he

liked. Duncan could see himself serving it up to Patrick in bed after waking him with a slow and thorough blowjob. Duncan wondered if slamming his head into the edge of the table would make those kinds of thoughts go away.

"You're a good tour guide, Duncan the Third," Wendy said as Duncan showed them around the neighborhood. He told them which stores were open late and when they usually got fresh produce.

"Couldn't you just call him Duncan?" Patrick said.

Wendy flatly refused.

"You ask her to stop calling you that. She won't listen to me," Patrick said to him.

"Wendy, could you just call me Duncan?" Duncan said very mildly.

"No," Wendy said, but she smiled at him sweetly.

That was good enough for Duncan.

"Didn't you hear? Duncan the Third would like you to stop calling him that," Patrick insisted.

"You made him say it. It doesn't count."

Their argumentative tone would confirm them as brother and sister even without the resemblance. Duncan could imagine them arguing on and on, exasperating their parents. But that was all over for them now. Their relationship had shifted. Patrick wasn't just Wendy's brother any more. With their parents gone, he had to take their place.

"We need to go bathroom shopping," Wendy whispered, cutting through Duncan's serious thoughts.

"Why didn't you go at the crepe place?" Patrick asked, clearing up Duncan's confusion.

"I didn't need to go then. Now let's find somewhere nice," she said.

Patrick sighed as Duncan tried to think of a good place for that sort of thing. They went into one of the nicer department stores. A blast of perfume scented, air-conditioned air hit them. They walked around until they saw the sign for the restrooms.

"Wait here and pretend to be shopping," Wendy instructed them.

They were next to a display of shoes and handbags.

"We could actually shop," Duncan said.

Wendy turned over a shoe to look at the price tag.

"Oh, no. It's too expensive," Wendy said.

"We'll splurge. It will be on me," Duncan said since the place wasn't out of his price range.

Wendy frowned at him and said, "You have to be careful with your money, Duncan the Third."

"Is she worried about money?" Duncan asked after she went into the ladies' room.

"That's my fault," Patrick said. "I might have stressed our limited budget too much, saving for college, that kind of thing."

"College for Wendy or for you?" Duncan asked though he had a feeling he knew the answer.

"Wendy is the priority. She'll probably get a scholarship, but there are always extra expenses."

"And what about you?"

"I'll probably go back one day," Patrick said like it was no big deal. Obviously Wendy's future was his main concern, not his own.

Once they were back out on the street, Wendy spotted a cute guy at a bus stop. She made them stop as she pointed him out to Patrick and warned Duncan not to try and steal him.

"What's the cute guy doing?" Patrick asked her.

"He's doing something on his phone," Wendy said.

"You want a guy who will ignore me and stare at his phone the whole time like Ben?" Patrick asked.

"No," she said. She now frowned at the guy with disapproval and they moved on.

Once she was a little ahead of them, Patrick told Duncan, "She takes this very seriously. She feels bad that I don't have a boyfriend. She thinks my ex left because of her."

"Did he?" Duncan asked. He pictured Jason if he had been faced with a boyfriend who suddenly had full responsibility for his kid sister.

"No. It was just bad timing. Mitch and I were already drifting apart, doing more stuff with our friends instead of with each other. Mitch just didn't want to break up with me so soon after my parents died. I couldn't deal with that issue myself. We stuck it out until I was ready to end it. He was basically a good guy. By then Wendy was living with me, and I couldn't convince her that Mitch didn't break up with me because of her. I think she didn't like him and wanted him gone. Kids feel guilty when something bad they wished for actually happens," Patrick said as he looked at Wendy stopping to look into a store window. Then he turned his attention on Duncan. "And what's your story?"

"I'm just taking it easy. Things didn't end well with my last

boyfriend. We were on different wavelengths."

It was a minimum of information but even with so little to go on, Patrick must have been able to tell that there was pain behind those few words.

"I hate him already," Patrick said. "For getting to have you and for breaking your heart."

"Is it that obvious that my heart is broken?" Duncan asked. He was really not good at pretending.

"Kind of."

"At least it taught me a lesson that I need to stay away from young guys."

Patrick clearly did not like hearing that.

"Maybe you learned the wrong lesson."

"What's the right lesson?" Duncan asked.

"Don't give away your heart until you can't help it."

"That's a lesson?"

"It's something I just learned." Patrick sounded like he meant it. He knew he had been warned, but it did not change the earnest look in his eyes. He still looked at Duncan like he was the perfect man and not a heartbroken wreck.

"You're getting carried away," Duncan said it to Patrick but even more to himself.

"We were just flirting."

"Flirting with you is flirting with heartbreak."

"Not if we do it right. There are all sorts of good things ahead. The only heartbreak will be if you reject me," Patrick said with a sad smile.

Duncan cursed himself. If Patrick came after him, there was no hope for him.

*

After picking up a few things to fill their refrigerator, Patrick and Wendy were back home, putting them away. Duncan had gone off somewhere, not back to his apartment. Patrick had the impression he was running away. He could tell that his strong come-on during their walk had scared Duncan. Since it was obvious that he had been hurt, it was natural for him to be skittish. It wouldn't do for Patrick to rush at him like some crazed linebacker. Too bad Patrick couldn't seem to help it. He had just been warned off, but it wasn't enough to scare him away from someone who was making his way into his heart. Patrick

could feel it like a light touch, a knock that made his heart want to open wide and take Duncan in the same way Patrick wanted to take him into his arms. There was nothing about Duncan that he could point to and say, it's his strong, slim body, it's his deep, soft voice, his caring, giving attitude. Unless it was his eyes. They did captivate him. Whatever it was about him, it was too late for warnings.

Chapter 3

Since their walk, Duncan had done his best not to run into Patrick again. The way Patrick had spoken had outlined how real Duncan's fear might become. He would fall in love with another man too young for him and find out too late that their paths in life diverged sharply and painfully. Duncan was determined to spare everyone that pain, not just himself. He had to stay away from Patrick even if it meant being alone.

It was on an evening a few days later that Duncan heard a knock at his door. When he opened it, Wendy was standing on his doorstep. Ben waved to him from the door of Wendy and Patrick's apartment. On their walk, Patrick had told him that Ben would be staying with Wendy after school.

"I'm making a birthday dinner for Patrick. It's a surprise," Wendy said.

"That's very nice," Duncan said. He waited to see what she wanted, but she just stood on his doormat and fidgeted.

"Do you need to borrow something?" Duncan prompted her. His kitchen was certainly well equipped though not well stocked with food.

Wendy only shook her head and made a face.

"Do you need help?" he finally asked her.

"Yes!" she said desperately. "Do you know anything about lasagna?"

"A little bit."

"Then come and help," she said and dragged him to her apartment. On the way she told him that Patrick was working late.

"I'm making Patrick a birthday lasagna. Jailbait isn't helping," she explained. "He doesn't know anything."

"That's young guys for you," Duncan joked as Ben perched on the arm of the couch impassively.

Wendy showed Duncan the pan with lasagna, already out of the oven. She gingerly tugged at the foil covering it but didn't pull it off.

"It's stuck. Jailbait said to yank it off like a band-aid. If I pull it up, all the cheese will come off," Wendy said with alarm.

"I see," Duncan said. Then he asked a little worriedly, "Wendy, how did you get this out of the oven?"

"Jailbait did it. He put it in the oven and got it out," Wendy said to Duncan's relief.

"So he did help you," he pointed out.

"Not enough," Wendy insisted. Ben just couldn't catch a break with her. "How do I get it unstuck?"

"Carefully," Duncan told her. "Do you have more cheese?"

She showed him half a bag of shredded cheese.

"We'll patch up any holes with that and remelt it."

While Duncan carefully got the aluminum foil off the lasagna with a spatula, Wendy showed him another pan.

"I made a brownie too. That's Patrick's favorite dessert."

"It's from a box," Ben tattled, and Duncan glared at him.

"What's wrong with that?" Wendy asked, mystified by Ben's snobbery.

"Nothing," Duncan told her. "He's jealous. It looks very nice."

"I'm going to put caramel on it." She held up a squeeze bottle with caramel topping. "And I have this 21." She showed him two candles in the shape of the numbers.

"That's going to look really good," Duncan said.

She smiled, proud of the work she had done to make her brother's birthday special. Duncan felt touched that he could make her happy so easily with just a little praise. Ever since his breakup with Justin, he had put out of his mind the idea of having children. This little girl brought back that longing. He thought how wonderful it must be to have a child in your life. Every second he had spent with Wendy confirmed that.

Expecting Patrick to arrive soon, Wendy went to get the gift and the card for him from her room. Duncan took a look around the kitchen.

"Is she really old enough to cook?" Duncan asked Ben seeing that Wendy had a footstool so she could climb and reach things.

Ben only shrugged.

"You could take a more active role," Duncan told him seeing that Wendy seemed to be in command.

"This is what free babysitting looks like," Ben said.

"Why does that sound familiar?" Duncan asked remembering something similar from when he was helping Patrick and Wendy move.

Seeing that everything was under control, Duncan was just waiting to tell Wendy that he was leaving.

"No, you helped me cook. You have to stay," Wendy pleaded when she came back.

"Maybe some other time," Duncan told her since he didn't want to intrude on a special occasion or be dragged back into their circle.

"No! Jailbait, help," Wendy said seeing Duncan move toward the door. "Duncan the Third is trying to escape."

"Asking for my help would work better if you didn't call me Jailbait," Ben said, and as usual, didn't jump to help out. He was leaning on the fridge, taking his usual languid pose.

"Stop him!" Wendy demanded anyway.

"I'll stay," Duncan decided to put an end to the drama. He figured he could excuse himself after he wished Patrick a happy birthday.

As he wasn't allowed to leave, Duncan helped Wendy a little more. They set the table, and Duncan showed her which way the utensils were supposed to go. When Patrick arrived, Wendy screamed, "Surprise!"

"Wow, what is all this?" Patrick acted stunned, like there was a fully stocked surprise party waiting for him. "Who did all this?" he asked looking at the table Wendy had set so carefully.

"I did it, but Duncan the Third helped me and even Jailbait," Wendy said.

"What smells so good?" Patrick asked.

"It's lasagna and brownies. Duncan the Third saved the lasagna."

"Good man."

Ben came over, said, "Happy birthday" and gave Patrick a one armed hug. Seeing him heading for the door, Patrick asked, "You're not staying?"

Duncan was surprised too.

"I have a date," Ben said. "My boyfriend drove down..."

"What?" Wendy said. "He can't date. He's jailbait."

"He can date other jailbait," Patrick told her with a laugh.

"Oh," Wendy said, but she frowned at Ben like she still suspected him of some wrongdoing.

With Ben gone, Duncan made another attempt to excuse himself, but Wendy took his hand as well as Patrick's and led them to the dining table. Duncan was worried that he was now the third wheel, but Patrick seemed to approve of the guest list.

Being a good brother, Patrick said that the table was impressive as he took his seat. With a little help, Wendy served the lasagna. Duncan tasted it then smiled at Wendy.

"Too much salt," he warned Patrick in a whisper.

Wendy realized the same thing as soon as she had a bite.

"Oh, no. It's too salty," Wendy said.

"No. It's great. Just the way I like it," Patrick told her and took a big mouthful.

Wendy looked at him uncertainly. Patrick just kept shoveling food into his mouth so she had to believe him. When Wendy wasn't looking, Duncan refilled Patrick's water glass for him.

After dinner, Wendy had chosen some movies for them to watch. She showed Duncan.

"Last time we watched all the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies. This time it's all movies starting with Z," she said as Duncan read the titles.

"*Zoolander*, *Zombieland*. *Hot Fuzz*?"

"You have to read it backwards," she said and then laughed. "Patrick likes zombie movies, but *Shaun of the Dead* doesn't start with a Z."

"I don't see *World War Z* on that list," Patrick complained.

"It's not a good birthday movie," Wendy told him.

"It has Brad Pitt in it."

"It's still not a good birthday movie," Wendy said.

Duncan only stayed for the first movie. After that, despite Wendy's protests, he was determined to let them have some quality time together.

"I'm walking you out," Patrick said and stepped out into the hallway with him. The way he closed the door behind him told Duncan that wasn't all he had on his mind.

"Thank you for joining us and helping Wendy."

"Thank you for having me," Duncan said.

"If you weren't already there, that's what I would have wished for when I blew out the candles. This way I could wish for something more from you." Patrick stepped closer to him, his eyes searching Duncan's.

Duncan had stopped breathing. How could he be so close to him and not kiss him? He couldn't. They exchanged a few more words in a whisper, but they were mostly drowned out by the beating of his heart. Duncan pressed his lips to Patrick's like a sleepwalker. It was a brief kiss that lasted for an eternity. It carried such a strong charge of lust and fear that Duncan drew back. Now that he had his birthday kiss, Patrick looked even more beautiful than before. His eyes were softer, filled with a need that had been stirred but not fulfilled. Duncan could hardly tear himself away from him when he looked like that. Somehow he did. Closing the door, he waited on the other side

of it. A few second's later, he heard Patrick's door close as he went in.

*

As Patrick sat on the couch, his mind wandered back to so many happy birthdays. Birthdays when his mom made him her special pina colada cake and his father poured sparkling cider with a flourish, pretending it was champagne were all in the past now. They crowded Patrick's mind as he sat with Zombieland muted but still playing on the TV and Wendy asleep, wrapped around his arm. His birthdays all got jumbled together, overlapping with laughter and the sound of gift wrap ripping. Through tears, he could see his younger self, grinning at the camera over a cake ablaze with candles as his parents stood on either side of him. Then, instead of himself, he saw Wendy and had to grit his teeth to get himself under control and not sob. Knowing that their parents would never again share their special days made Patrick wonder if either he or Wendy would ever again have a purely happy birthday.

To cheer himself up, he turned his mind to the real surprise of the evening – Duncan. Finding him there when he came home was like Wendy had read his mind and fulfilled his birthday wish. But it was when he was leaving that Duncan gave him the real gift.

Patrick couldn't allow him to leave without letting him know how much it meant to have him there. He was dying to do it more physically, to hug him and kiss him till there was no doubt in his mind. Instead, Patrick satisfied himself with words and closing the distance between them. The rest was up to Duncan.

"Happy birthday," Duncan whispered to him as they stood close.

"You owe me a gift," Patrick said. He looked at Duncan's mouth to let him know he would settle for a kiss. He didn't make a move, leaving it to Duncan.

It was almost enough to see Duncan look at him with his blue-gray eyes melting. Duncan leaned in very slowly. The anticipation made Patrick's heart beat harder and faster, battering at his chest. The first contact almost knocked him down. Duncan's lips parted his, and Patrick let his eyes close. Duncan's mouth glided softly over his then it was gone. Patrick let out a sigh. Over too soon, the kiss had been the sweetest thing Patrick ever tasted. After that, it wasn't easy to let Duncan leave. Holding himself back, Patrick watched him walk to his door, giving him one last look of longing before he went in.

Chapter 4

With a lunchbox in one hand and the phone to his ear, Arthur arrived at The Copper Kettle. Duncan could guess that he was talking to his boyfriend. Arthur's face wasn't much to look at, but he had an exceptional body and a boyfriend he mentioned every chance he got. His boyfriend was average in every way, but that didn't stop Arthur from gloating about him. Not that Duncan was jealous of them. At the moment, Arthur was sending his boyfriend kisses through the phone. Even with that display of affection to put up with, Duncan was still relieved to be at work, too busy to be getting himself in any deeper with Patrick. Duncan couldn't seem to keep from making the same mistake over and over again. At every step he was making things worse. After telling himself that he couldn't have anything to do with Patrick, Duncan joined him for his birthday and then kissed him. Talk about idiotic, self-destructive behavior. Just as Duncan was kicking himself, he saw Patrick's friend Cory walk into The Copper Kettle.

"Patrick told me about this place. Nice. I'll have to get a few things for my kitchen, make it look like I can cook," Cory said.

Duncan noticed that he wasn't as cute as Ben but had a straightforward, dependable charm. He was glad Patrick had a friend like him.

"You can't cook?"

"I'm terrible. Ben is doing more cooking than I ever did. I'm on my way to pick him up from Patrick's place right now," Cory said.

"It's nice of him to stay with Wendy."

"He isn't busy, so why not," Cory said with a shrug. He was the kind of person who expected people to pitch in. But then his expression changed, and he smiled at Duncan knowingly. "I hear you and Patrick are getting to know each other."

"I'm getting to know how relentless he is," Duncan told him to squash any rumors that might get started.

"Patrick?" Cory seemed genuinely surprised. "That's weird. He's downright laid back. He's takes it pretty slow until he gets to know someone better. I guess you bring out his wild side." Cory looked at Duncan with new appreciation before he left.

Though Duncan complained about Patrick being forward, it didn't diminish his charms at all. It just made him more dangerous and harder to resist. Just thinking about his eyes and the taste of that kiss made his heart race. It nearly made him run to Patrick. Thoughts of a dismal future were the only thing stopping him. He couldn't afford to

fall for another young guy, and Patrick was even younger than Jason. But as soon as the bleak future slipped his mind, driven away by Patrick's smile, Duncan was at the mercy of his wayward feelings again.

*

Just back from work, Patrick was shrugging out of his suit jacket while he awkwardly held the phone to his ear. That's when Cory barged in.

"What have you been doing?" he asked before he saw that Patrick was on the phone.

Patrick finished up his conversation then asked him, "What are you talking about?"

Cory seemed calmer now. He had verified that Ben was on the phone in Wendy's room, where she was doing homework.

"Why does your neighbor think you're some kind of, I don't know, horndog?" he asked Patrick.

"Oh God, what have I been doing?" Patrick now asked himself.

"Coming on too strong is my guess. Since when?" Cory asked, dismayed. He was right. It wasn't Patrick's style.

He tried to explain.

"I don't know. When I'm around him, I just can't stop myself. He's so reserved. He holds himself back and looks so fuckable. I just want to jump him."

"Don't," Cory ordered him. Then he told him, "It's like in fencing. You have to draw your opponent in then you strike. You can't be lunging at him all the time."

"I didn't realize we were fencing," Patrick said to the fencing champ.

"Yes, you did. This isn't some frat boy you're dealing with. You can't afford to come off as some idiot who thinks with his dick."

"Fuck," Patrick said, knowing Cory was right.

"Sorry. I should have been more diplomatic."

"No. I have to be serious if I want him to take me seriously."

"How serious do you want to get?" Cory asked.

"Deadly."

"Oh, God. Be careful. And don't act like some high-schooler with a boner."

"Stop kicking my ego when it's down."

"Why are you yelling at Patrick?" Wendy wanted to know as she came into the living room. Patrick hoped she didn't hear too much of what they said.

"He wasn't being a gentleman," Cory told her.

"Patrick! Shame on you," Wendy said immediately.

"Don't pile on. Cory already yelled at me."

Patrick was glad that Cory had hit him with the truth. It wasn't pleasant, but it was for his own good. With whatever went down with Duncan's jerk of an ex, Patrick knew he needed to take it slow. Plus Duncan had told him that he had sworn off younger guys. That was one strike against Patrick even on his best behavior. If his brain was capable of strategizing around Duncan, he should be acting super mature not like a "high-schooler with a boner".

Patrick just wanted him so much. Instead of playing it cool, he was always blurting out whatever came into his head. But he had to have some kind of release. What he really wanted to do was fuck the life out of Duncan and not let up until there was nothing in the world, no sad eyes, no regret, no loss, just the two of them and love.

Patrick wondered if he had already alienated Duncan. He got that kiss, but he almost extorted it from him. Patrick resolved to do damage control as soon as he could. Actually he was tempted to go over and see him, apologize and explain himself, but that was the opposite of acting cool. He would wait for an opportunity and then act as polite and sophisticated as he knew how. Patrick couldn't let Duncan get away. He never had such a strong urge to claim a guy, to let him know how he felt with his words and with his body until the guy was his. But first he had to show him he had the self-control to back off.

*

It was Friday afternoon, and Duncan was staring at the empty shelves in his fridge. It was a depressing sight so he decided to go grocery shopping. Stepping out the door, he saw Wendy carrying a big laundry basket full of towels and struggling to open her apartment door.

"Hey, there," Duncan said as he went over to help her.

"Hi, Duncan the Third," she greeted him.

"You're doing some serious laundry." As he opened the door for her, Duncan could see Ben lounging on the couch, earphones in his ears.

"I want to be helpful. I don't want to be a big burden to Patrick," she said as she maneuvered the laundry and herself through the door.

"You could never be a burden," Duncan told her as she set the basket on the floor.

"But I am. Patrick was supposed to finish college. He had to quit and get a full time job because of me. But I'm going to pay him back. When I get a job, I'm going to buy Patrick a new car. Maybe even a convertible."

"Sounds like a good plan. You're one cool kid."

"I'm not cool. The popular girls at school call me Dunkin' Donuts. And they call me a nerd, a geek and a dork." She counted off. Then she added, "And a spaz too. One time when I fell on the stairs, they laughed at me. They're idiots."

"They sound like idiots."

"My best friends Sammy and Alana aren't cool either, so it's OK."

"I still think you're cool," Duncan told her.

"That's because you don't know any better," she said to him, bluntly.

"Let me guess, because I'm old?"

"Exactly," she said with a smile.

"Good luck with your chores. Don't work too hard."

On his way back, Duncan was waiting for the elevator when he saw Patrick coming in. Raising his eyes from his phone, Patrick stopped then took a step back.

"Hi, Duncan. Nice to see you," he said with an odd, restrained smile on his face.

Duncan held the elevator door open for him, but Patrick waved him off and backed away.

"Oh, no. I'll tackle the stairs," he told him.

"Is something wrong?" Duncan asked, concerned. He frantically searched his mind for some way he might have offended or upset him.

Patrick just gave him a bland "No, nothing's wrong" in reply. Duncan couldn't really believe that. Patrick was acting so strange as he hesitated to leave. Duncan held up the elevator and kept looking at him worriedly.

"I'm playing it cool," Patrick finally told him and slumped over a little, looking defeated.

"What?" Duncan said.

"I'm trying not to be pushy or whatever," Patrick said, looking chastised.

Duncan sighed. This was all because of his conversation with Cory. They both got in the elevator since Patrick saw there was no point in pretending any more.

"I'm sorry. I should have known better than to tell your best friend..." Duncan started to say.

"No. I knew I was acting stupid. I'm not like that. When I'm with you, I just blurt out whatever I'm thinking and mostly I'm thinking how good you look, how good you smell, and how much I want you."

Duncan couldn't help feeling flattered and even happy to hear those words.

"Thanks. I'm not saying keep hitting on me every second, but as you see, when you aren't being yourself, it's weird."

"I just don't want you to think badly of me," Patrick said looking at him earnestly.

"I don't. I just forgot I was supposed to complain about you to my best friend not to yours. Please feel free to be yourself around me," Duncan told him.

"Around you, I can't seem to help coming off like an idiot."

"It's not all bad," Duncan had to admit.

"Then if it's OK, I'll just keep making a fool of myself."

"Please do."

"You smell nice," he told Duncan.

"It's the rosemary," Duncan said just as the elevator doors opened.

"Want to come over? I promise to be on my worst behavior." Patrick made the invitation apologetically, like he was expecting a no.

Duncan looked down at his shopping bags.

"If you and Wendy want to come over to my place, I wanted to roast a chicken. That's not really a meal for one."

"Sounds good. What can we bring?" Patrick asked looking eager, happy and completely like himself.

"An extra chair," Duncan said. He felt kind of embarrassed to have to ask.

"Huh?" Patrick made a face, not sure if he heard him right. Most people had at least three chairs, maybe even four.

"I only have one chair for the kitchen table plus my desk chair," Duncan admitted.

"You are kidding me?" Patrick didn't spare his feelings by pretending he didn't think that was weird.

Duncan visualized the three of them sitting on mismatched chairs at

the little table in the kitchen.

"I think the kitchen table is big enough to seat three," Duncan said with a frown.

"Oh, man."

"I wasn't planning on entertaining," Duncan said defensively.

"Ever? Are you a hermit?" Patrick said, still showing no mercy.

"Pretty much."

"OK. We'll bring two chairs." Patrick shook his head. "You are something," he told Duncan with a fond smile as they temporarily went their separate ways.

*

Patrick had panicked when he saw Duncan standing in front of the elevator. He had planned to act cool the next time he saw him, but he wasn't prepared. When the elevator doors opened, he realized that he was about to be trapped in the elevator with Duncan. He wasn't sure how long he could keep up this cool guy act. He already wanted to offer to carry his bags right into his apartment, ask him if he bought anything good, invite him to come over tonight. Instead he headed for the stairs but never made it.

Patrick smiled thinking back to Duncan's concerned face. He was such a good guy, and really, there was no pretending with him. Whatever the consequences, Patrick was just going to have to be himself around him.

Patrick watched Duncan's face as he opened the door to him and Wendy. There was a little uncertainty there, but he smiled at Wendy wholeheartedly. Seeing Patrick with one chair under each arm, Duncan took one from him.

Duncan's apartment had a lot of gray and black, and Patrick could tell right away that Wendy didn't like it. Duncan could tell too. She looked from his furniture to Duncan like she was looking for some sort of explanation.

"I didn't exactly make it homey, did I?" Duncan said to her apologetically.

"I can help you redecorate," Wendy volunteered eagerly.

"Wait to be asked," Patrick told her. He had to tell her that all the time.

"Actually my friend Stacy is an interior decorator," Duncan said. "And she isn't too happy with what I've done with the place. But I told

her if I saw her standing on my doorstep with throw pillows, I wouldn't let her in."

"That's mean. She just wants to help," Wendy said.

Duncan laughed. They carried the chairs into the kitchen. There was a lot of stuff from the store there so it was more to Wendy's liking.

Wendy was in the living room, picking out dinner music from Duncan's iPod. If his collection was anything like Patrick imagined, that was going to take a while. Alone with Duncan in the kitchen, Patrick thanked him for being so accepting of his pushiness.

"I'm relieved you gave me permission to be myself. I have to do a lot of fake smiling and glad-handing at work. It kills me," Patrick said, then he turned to Duncan. "But you probably get some of that with your customers too."

"Not too much. But everyone is happier being themselves." Duncan gave him a significant look. It was almost a warning not to try the fake act with him again. Then he got even more serious. "It's good to know where you stand with people," he said.

Patrick sensed that they were hitting close to the heart now. The hurt look on Duncan's face only disappeared when he saw Patrick looking at him.

"I won't make you worry again," Patrick promised. If Duncan needed him to be straightforward and honest, he was more than happy to oblige him.

*

When he could hardly fit three dinner plates, salad plates and glasses on the kitchen table, Duncan resolved to get a proper dining table. He had to leave the big serving plate on the counter. After letting Wendy admire the way the chicken looked surrounded by potatoes, he started carving.

"It's the little potatoes. Those are the best ones. And little tomatoes are good too," Wendy informed Duncan.

"I'll make sure to get some," Duncan said without thinking. It sounded like he was going to be shopping with Wendy in mind. His shopping today had been different too. He hadn't done any serious cooking since he cooked for Jason. Making anything more elaborate than a sandwich was a reminder of not having anyone to share his meals or his life. Today he had shopped like he expected company. Maybe seeing Wendy right before he left had given him that idea.

"She wants the wings," Patrick said to Duncan.

"I'm not greedy. I just want one," Wendy said to be polite.

"OK. I'll have the other one," Patrick said.

Once they sat down with their plates, Patrick immediately shifted his wing over to Wendy's plate. But he said, "Don't eat that one. It's mine. I'm just putting it on your plate for safekeeping."

Wendy rolled her eyes at him. While she smiled over the two wings on her plate, Duncan caught himself making plans to cook some wings. There was an Asian sauce he was pretty sure she would like.

"You know how to cook a bird," Patrick said after he had a few bites.

"You did a great job," Wendy agreed.

"Thank you," Duncan said to them.

To have them at his table, however ridiculously small, was a treat, more than he could have imagined. Wendy had such strong opinions about everything, but she was an attentive listener too. She had a special smile just for the times when Patrick teased her. Sitting across from him, Duncan noticed that Patrick wasn't just a threat to his peace of mind. He had a quiet nature, easily stepping back to let Wendy shine. But whenever Patrick looked at him, Duncan could see unrelenting pursuit in his eyes, like he was always saying, "I can't let you go."

When it was time for them to go, Duncan found that he regretted that they were leaving. Despite himself, he wished he and Patrick could stay up, sit close together and take a chance that something might happen. Left alone, Duncan couldn't stop imagining the feel of Patrick's body, how he might strip his clothes off in quick, careless motions that revealed a beautifully muscled body and a cock ready for Duncan. Even as he struggled against images of Patrick flooding his mind, Duncan realized that he liked Patrick for everything he was. He was attracted to more than his body. He even liked him for being so forward. He smiled thinking of Patrick trying not to come on so strong. Why did Duncan have to find his attempt at being distant and restrained almost heartbreaking? He just couldn't bear to let Patrick think that he wasn't wanted.

Though he scolded himself for the way he felt, Duncan couldn't deny how much he loved spending time with both Patrick and Wendy. Maybe with Wendy as a chaperone, the danger would be minimized. Of course it was ridiculous to count on a little kid to protect him from himself. But to keep his heart safe, Duncan needed all the help he could get. He was already determined to buy more chairs, a bigger

table, and food Wendy liked. What the hell was happening to him? Whatever it was, he couldn't tell if it was good or bad, only that he couldn't put a stop to it.

Only a few months ago, he had deliberately furnished his apartment for one. It was a statement he made mainly to himself, a reminder not to get involved. Having Patrick and Wendy come over made him look at his apartment more critically but not because he wanted to impress them. He just wanted them to feel at home. Such dangerous thoughts. It was as if he had learned nothing from Jason. Once again he was falling into the trap of wanting to make a home for someone.

The next day, Wendy and Patrick stopped by in the evening. Wendy stood in front of his door with a big smile and a potted plant in her hands.

"It's a thank you present. You need a plant to make your place nicer," she said.

"Real diplomatic," Patrick said. He was hanging back, letting Duncan know that this was Wendy's idea.

"Thank you," Duncan said taking the basil plant from her. He noticed how it released its scent as it was disturbed.

"I was going to get you a regular plant, but then I saw they had herbs. That's even better because you can cook with them," she explained.

"That was very thoughtful. Do you guys want to come in?" Duncan offered. He was already thinking about what to make, but Patrick said they were going to go visit some friends of their parents. As he closed the door, Duncan fought the low feeling that came over him. If the feeling wasn't so strong, he would have denied it. The smart thing was to see them less not more, but that wasn't what his heart wanted.

Chapter 5

Duncan was checking some paperwork from the store while waiting to go get his laundry out of the dryer. Through his front door, he heard Wendy laugh out in the hall. He decided it was as good a time as any to go check on his laundry. When he stepped out and saw Wendy was alone, laughing with someone on the phone, he was acutely disappointed. Now he couldn't deny how much he had been hoping to see Patrick there with her. He waved to Wendy so he wouldn't interrupt her conversation. She waved back and smiled.

Duncan went into the laundry room, chastising himself for trying to run into Patrick like that. That's when he ran into just the man he had been hoping to see.

"So you're the one I've been waiting for," Patrick said. He grinned and added, "In more ways than one."

Duncan saw that all the dryers were busy, but that his clothes were done.

"Sorry to make you wait. You can have the drier now," Duncan said as he pulled his clothes out.

"Don't go," Patrick said when Duncan was about to leave with his laundry. "Fold them here. Keep me company. I'm waiting for my work shirts. I have to get them out as soon as they finish then I hardly even need to iron them."

"I like your work ethic," Duncan said. He stayed and started folding his boxers.

"No, no. Fold those slowly. Or do you want me to do it for you?" Patrick offered with a smirk.

"It's folding not a striptease."

"It is if you use your imagination."

"I thought Wendy did all the laundry," Duncan said.

"She tries to do too much," Patrick said ruefully. Duncan could tell that he was aware of her feelings of guilt that Patrick's education got derailed.

"That's because she appreciates everything you've done for her," Duncan told him.

"We help each other," Patrick said. "Come over later and help us cook."

"I've seen Wendy cook."

"Come on. Be brave. Anyway, you haven't seen me in action,"

Patrick said with a suggestive look in his eyes.

"Why does everything you say sound like a come on?"

"Because it is," Patrick admitted. "Don't say no. I like Wendy, but I like adult company too. And Wendy is your second biggest fan," Patrick said.

Duncan didn't ask who his biggest fan was, he just gave in.

"Come over whenever you're ready," Patrick told him.

*

When Patrick gave Wendy the news that Duncan was coming over, she cheered then straightened up a little around the apartment. Noticing the amused look Patrick gave her for her effort, she told him, "Duncan the Third's place is really neat. I don't want him to think we're slobs."

"You're doing a good job. At this rate, he'll be my boyfriend any day now," Patrick teased her.

"You said you were just friends. We're all friends. A boyfriend has to be cute," she told him, her brow furrowed. But as soon as Duncan was at the door, she rushed the greet him, all smiles. What a confused kid. Monopolizing him while Patrick just looked on, she showed Duncan what they were going to make.

"We're cooking Dad's chicken leg stew. First we make the stew with the chicken legs, then we fish them out, put barbeque sauce on them and bake them. That's the Dad way," she said with a proud grin.

"Dad had a unique way of doing things," Patrick said. "He always put his own spin on a recipe."

"It sounds good," Duncan said.

Wendy put him to work right away, and Duncan didn't seem to mind taking orders from the little tyrant. For someone who knew what he was doing in the kitchen better than either of them, that was really sweet of him.

"Duncan the Third..." Wendy started to say.

"Just call him Duncan," Patrick begged her.

"No," she said then continued with what she wanted to say to Duncan, "You're going too fast." She was complaining because Duncan was expertly chopping the carrots.

"He's showing off," Patrick told her while Duncan continued at the same pace.

"Stop showing off, Duncan the Third. You'll slice off a finger,"

Wendy scolded him.

"I'll slow down," he told her. When he did, Wendy gave him her approval with a nod.

"Where did you get the knife skills?" Patrick asked.

"I worked in a restaurant in college."

"That's why you can cook," Patrick concluded.

"I mostly did prep work," Duncan said modestly.

Patrick stared at him but stopped before either Duncan or Wendy objected. He could look at Duncan all day. He was like looking at the sky. It might be covered in clouds, shrouded in gray, darkened by the setting of the sun, but it always returned to a beautiful blue. Duncan was that perfect blue sky as seen through clouds. Patrick couldn't resist him. He wanted to be his earth, hold him, look at him, and never be away from him.

*

Duncan followed Wendy's instructions to the letter. He wanted to make their dad's stew and the chicken legs recipe exactly the way she remembered it. When they served it up, Duncan had only good things to say. The dish had undeniable appeal. Wendy was delighted that he liked it. Duncan saw that Patrick smiled but also looked sad.

"Thanks Dad," Wendy said before she bit into her chicken leg. It was almost like saying grace.

"Thank you for sharing such a special recipe with me," Duncan told her.

She told him that chicken was her favorite meat, but that Patrick liked all the meats.

"Sausage, salami, stick of pepperoni," Patrick listed then coughed to cover the fact that Duncan had just kicked him under the table.

"Sliced pepperoni is better," Wendy said.

"Yes. Sliced really thin," Duncan agreed and glared at Patrick.

Duncan thought he might leave after dinner, but Wendy wouldn't allow it. She got him to stay and watch TV with them. When she sat between him and Patrick on the couch, Duncan wanted to thank her. Duncan noticed that the way Patrick looked at him had only intensified. He kind of expected the opposite might happen. A few evenings spent together in domestic settings shouldn't have fired him up like that. Once Wendy went to sleep, Duncan was expecting some bad behavior from him. He got up to leave.

"Now that Wendy is in bed, you're leaving? Are you afraid to be alone with me?" Patrick said.

Duncan was going to deny it, but then decided on the honest approach.

"I don't feel completely safe with you."

Patrick gave him a slightly hurt look.

"Stay. I promise your virtue is safe. We'll keep a pillow between us," Patrick said, but he grinned in a way that told Duncan that a pillow wouldn't keep him safe. Despite that, Duncan stayed. He found that to look into Patrick's eyes and to deny him anything was impossible.

Patrick set up the throw pillow between them as they sat down. Only a few minutes later, he stretched and threw his arm over the back of the sofa. Duncan watched his hand inching closer.

"Really?" Duncan said.

"It's a classic for a reason," Patrick said of his maneuver. Then he changed tactics.

Patrick placed the pillow on Duncan's lap then his head on the pillow. From there, Patrick gazed up at him.

"I'm not breaking the rule. There's still a pillow between us. You're safe," he lied. His voice was thick and low. Duncan was anything but safe.

"I don't know why I keep pushing my luck with you," Duncan said.

"It's a mystery." Patrick rolled his eyes.

"You aren't irresistible," Duncan claimed.

"I am to you."

"That's kind of arrogant."

"No, it's not. I can see it in your eyes. And it's mutual."

Duncan leaned down and kissed him. He just wanted to shut him up. Patrick's strong arms reached up and wrapped around him. Patrick rose into the kiss then fell back and gasped when Duncan ended it. For a while he just blinked.

"You're amazing," Patrick said. He was looking up at the ceiling blindly.

Duncan wanted to kiss him again, but Patrick turned to look at him with a sad and happy look in his eyes. He then raised himself up so he was face to face with Duncan.

"This is why I don't let up on you. You're worth fighting for," Patrick told him.

Duncan put his arms around him and pulled him close. Chest to chest, he could feel Patrick's breathing, deep and even but a little too

fast and he kissed him again. He just wanted to stay like that, holding and kissing him forever. Somehow he stopped and wrenched himself away from his embrace.

As he walked away, he felt like he was leaving behind him torn pieces of his heart, like his heart was too weak to hold together and was falling apart at every step. He was in a daze as he closed the door of his own apartment and leaned against it. Remembering the pain Jason caused him, the cold feeling inside him, he used to think that there was a hole where his heart used to be. Now he had proof that there was still a heart there. He knew because Patrick made his heart beat like crazy. It was knocking against his ribs, telling him what it wanted even as it got torn apart. It wanted that man with dark blue eyes and dimples. There was his heart wanting, needing, ready to torment him again, and deep inside him a voice was calling for a strong, unwavering love to match his own, to make him whole.

Duncan was in turmoil as he went to bed and dead-tired when he got up. Sex dreams and nightmares had kept him restless even when he was asleep. Looking at his pitiful face in the mirror, he decided that being clean-shaven would make him look halfway human and less likely to scare the customers. Afterward, he decided he saw some minor improvement, but he didn't expect anyone to comment. Arthur gave him an approving smile when he saw him.

"So you are finally over Jason. That's great," Arthur said, sounding relieved.

"How's that?"

"Look at you. You shaved."

"I've shaved before."

"Yeah, but you look... I don't know. Like you finally woke up on the right side of the bed. Was it someone else's bed by any chance?" Arthur said while wiggling his eyebrows.

"Nearly," Duncan grumbled.

"Let's hear it," he demanded.

"There's nothing to hear."

"You're all bright eyed and clean shaven, there's something to tell," Arthur insisted.

"Well, you won't be hearing it."

"At least we can stop walking on eggshells around here," Arthur said as he walked away to restock some shelves.

"What?" Duncan said mostly to himself.

He went to the back and looked at himself in the mirror again.

What the hell was Arthur seeing? Duncan felt like hell, hardly bright-eyed. If anything he looked feverish and spent, like a crazy man in love.

Though he certainly wasn't going to talk to Arthur about his personal life, he did need to talk to someone. He called Stacy and confessed to her how much time he was spending with Patrick and Wendy. When she asked what they were doing, he had to confess that too.

"Laundry and cooking?" she said, appalled at his choice of activities. "Duncan, it doesn't get any more domestic than that. Are you sure you're attracted to this guy?"

"Unfortunately, I am very sure," Duncan said with a sigh.

"Sounds like they adopted you." That didn't sound sexy either.

"I'm just the pathetic, lonely neighbor."

"And Patrick is the hot, young neighbor. I wonder which one of you is going to sneak over for a midnight visit first?"

"Neither."

"A cute young guy living that close, it's a done deal," she predicted. "I know your weakness as well as you do."

"Not this time. I'm not going to get into another train wreck when I can see it coming."

"Then you better move," Stacy told him bluntly.

Duncan wondered if that was really the only solution. It wouldn't work anyway. Now that he knew Patrick, Duncan didn't trust himself to stay away no matter where he lived.

Chapter 6

Duncan wasn't lingering by the mailboxes because he was hoping to see Patrick coming home. He was just sorting his mail. His loitering was rewarded when he saw Patrick coming in with Wendy, whose face was covered with paint in a pattern of leaves. Before Duncan could say anything, Wendy said, "You shaved. You look much better. Still not cute but much better."

"What explains this?" Duncan asked of her painted face.

"Lonnie was practicing on me," Wendy said.

"You met her when we moved. She's the blonde with red and black streaks in her hair. She's taking a body painting class. Lonnie is an art major trapped in a body of a business major. She was babysitting Wendy," Patrick explained.

"Don't call it that," Wendy objected.

"Ben was busy?" Duncan guessed.

"He got a paying part time job. I've been shuffling Wendy between my friends depending on who has classes when."

"Can I do anything," Duncan offered.

"I'm figuring it out. For the summer I..."

"I can go to The Copper Kettle with Duncan the Third," Wendy said, coming up with her own solution.

"Duncan isn't free babysitting," Patrick told her.

"That's right. If you come with me to the store, I'll have to put you to work," Duncan said.

"Yay!" Wendy was already celebrating.

"I can pick her up from school and bring her to the store," Duncan said.

"You aren't serious?" Patrick asked.

"Why not? I could use the help and the company."

"She'll be in the way," Patrick said.

"She's never in the way."

"How much are you going to pay me?" Wendy asked.

"Wendy," Patrick said to stop her. "Duncan is doing us a favor."

"Minimum wage plus lunch," Duncan said.

"OK. It's a deal." She put out her hand for a handshake.

Patrick looked at Duncan still not believing he was serious.

Wendy went up to wash her face, and Patrick and Duncan lingered. Patrick wanted to make sure Duncan knew what he was getting into, then he thanked him.

"You're too good to us. Makes me wish I wasn't always trying so hard to get into your pants."

"I'm the one with no self-control," Duncan said. "I try to keep you at arms length then I kissed you twice."

"With me pushing," Patrick said to give Duncan an excuse.

"I know you were holding back. You act pushy, but you're not. I appreciate that."

"I don't want to screw things up. You're a great guy. I know what I want. Once you can say the same thing, we'll really have something."

They got into the elevator. Patrick pressed four. Then he turned to Duncan, and they kissed during the short elevator ride. Duncan loved the feel of their mouths opening to each other, tongues gliding over one another, two sets of arms holding tight. The elevator dinged like a timer going off, and they separated.

"I'm at the mercy of my lustful thoughts," Patrick said like he was apologizing. He had moved his hands up to caress Duncan's face where stubble was already starting to grow.

"As am I, it seems."

"Yours or mine?" Patrick asked him.

Duncan refused to answer.

The next day Wendy started at The Copper Kettle. In exchange, Duncan got her agreement to call him Duncan when they were at work. First she inspected the place even more thoroughly than when she visited before. Then she got busy memorizing where everything was.

"She's after my job," Arthur grumbled. He was an OK employee, but Wendy was a dynamo. She already had half the aisles memorized.

"I have all the timers and thermometers memorized," Wendy reported.

Before Duncan could say anything, she was off. Her energy was frightening. Just then Stacy came through the door looking so fashionably put together that all she was missing was a tiny dog. She was like something straight off a glossy page of a magazine. Her dark hair was as smooth as glass and just as shiny. She was wearing makeup so expertly applied that it looked like she wasn't wearing any. Her clothes fit perfectly, and her wrists always jingled with bracelets.

"Business or pleasure?" Duncan asked her as he gave her a kiss. She

sometimes shopped at the store for her clients and other times just stopped by to see him.

"That depends on what you have to tell me," she said. "How are things with the young and the hopeless."

Duncan made sure to keep his voice down because of Wendy.

"He was trying to move a little too fast," Duncan said. "But that turned out to be the lesser of two evils. The truth is I'm the problem not Patrick."

Stacy was just about to ask him what he meant when Duncan spotted Wendy approaching them. He introduced her to Stacy.

"This is Patrick's sister, Wendy. Wendy this is my friend, Stacy."

"Hello. Nice to meet you," Wendy said. "I'm glad Duncan has a pretty friend."

"Thank you," Stacy said then she turned to Duncan. "He already has you babysitting? He does work fast."

"It's not babysitting. I work here," Wendy said.

"Oh, sorry," Stacy said with a smile.

Wendy was ready to let her off the hook.

"That's OK. Most kids my age don't have jobs," Wendy said then went off to memorize another shelf.

"She's going to take over this place," Stacy predicted.

Duncan agreed.

"Patrick will be stopping by to pick her up soon if you want to meet him," Duncan told her.

"And I thought you were hiding him from me," Stacy said.

"Why would I be hiding him?"

"So you wouldn't have to get mad at me when I don't like him," Stacy said.

They both knew what she was talking about. She had never liked Jason. Since Stacy didn't know how to be nice to people she didn't like, Duncan wasn't happy with her for a while. Not to mention that she hinted to Duncan that he should move slowly with "that guy". He remembered her cold smile whenever she mentioned Jason. Even after she was proved right about him, Duncan was still mad at her a little maybe because of that unspoken "I told you so" that hung in the air. He kind of dreaded having her meet Patrick, but he also hoped it might serve as a cold dose of reality.

Duncan spotted Patrick through the store windows. As soon as he walked in, Wendy ran to him and chattered about all the work she had been doing. Patrick was only going to wave at Duncan, seeing he

was busy with someone.

"She isn't a customer. She's Duncan's pretty friend," Wendy told her brother when he said they shouldn't disturb him.

"She knows how to get on my good side," Stacy said as she extended her hand to Patrick. "I'm Stacy."

"I'm Patrick, nice to meet you."

"Likewise." Stacy smiled and held his hand longer than she needed to while gazing at Patrick appreciatively. It was nothing like the thin smiles she threw at Jason. And though she admitted that Jason was attractive, she said that he was missing "that something that makes me want to wrap my legs around a guy." Whatever that something was, Patrick obviously had it. As Duncan wondered if he was going to have to pull her off him, Wendy stepped in.

"Don't get a crush on Patrick. He's gay," she told Stacy.

"That won't keep me from getting a crush on him," Stacy told her, but she did finally let go of Patrick. She winked at Duncan as she said goodbye to them and left.

"I was a hit," Patrick told Duncan unnecessarily.

"Yes. I noticed," Duncan told him sourly. In truth, he was relieved.

"Don't be jealous," Patrick taunted him.

Wendy was off getting her things, so Patrick asked for a report.

"How did it go today?" Patrick wanted to know. He seemed a little worried.

"She did great. She takes working at the store very seriously. Arthur thought he was fired for a minute there."

"Replaced by a nine year old?"

"She's a real threat."

"To your sanity?" Patrick said still not sure that it could have gone well.

"Not at all. She's determined to make herself useful. She already started memorizing the stock, the name for everything and what it's used for. She's a little sponge."

"The nerd gene is strong in that one. And I wouldn't have her any other way," Patrick said.

"She's welcome to stay with me any time. She's no trouble."

"You're too nice. Even if you do have that jealous streak."

"I come by it honestly."

"Does that mean I'm not allowed to enjoy your jealousy?" Patrick asked a little worriedly.

"Just don't enjoy it too much." Duncan settled for that since he knew he couldn't win against those dimples and blue eyes.

It made him think back to first seeing Jason and noticing how attractive he was but not feeling much of anything deeper than sexual interest. He only developed feelings for him after they started spending time together. Patrick had an immediate impact on him that went beyond his good looks. Since that first meeting, Patrick's effect on him was only growing stronger. Duncan just wished he could have met him at a different time, when he could have blindly jumped into his arms.

Chapter 7

Wendy had a day off from school so she went to work with Duncan in the morning. Having done all the memorizing, Wendy was now always busy cleaning up and straightening. The store had never been in better shape. She put both him and Arthur to shame.

Noticing a woman who looked like she couldn't find something, Duncan finished up with another customer then came out from behind the register. He was about to offer his help, when Wendy popped up next to the woman.

"Can I help you find something?" Wendy asked.

The woman smiled at her, surprised.

"I'm looking for a bamboo rice steamer," she said to Wendy, not expecting to get any real help from a little kid.

By now Wendy knew where everything was. She pointed out the rice steamer on the top shelf then went to get Duncan to get it down for her. After the woman checked out, Wendy went to open the door for her.

"Thank you for shopping at The Copper Kettle. Please come back soon," Wendy said.

"You were a big help. Thank you. And thank your dad for me too," she said as Wendy held the door for her.

Wendy looked after the woman with a confused frown. Then she realized she meant Duncan.

"Sorry," Duncan told her, worried that it might have upset her.

Wendy only seemed a little sad.

"It's not your fault you look like a dad," Wendy said. "I bet you'd make a good dad." She looked up at Duncan with approval.

"Thank you," Duncan said, smiling at the thought. "Maybe one day."

It was close to noon, and they didn't have too many customers after that so Duncan thought he might be able to take Wendy out to lunch. He first texted Patrick to ask if it was OK.

"Don't spoil her," Patrick had answered, but then he said yes.

Duncan called Wendy over.

"It's pretty slow. Arthur can handle things around here. You want to go have lunch?" Duncan offered. "Patrick said it was OK."

"What about Arthur?" Wendy asked, worried that he was being left out.

Arthur spoke up for himself.

"My boyfriend packs me a lunch every day," Arthur said, smiling kind of smugly. He never missed a chance to brag about how sweet his boyfriend was.

"He sounds nice," Wendy said.

They stepped outside without a plan. As they were trying to figure out where to go, Duncan had an idea.

"You want to go visit Patrick at the hotel?" he asked Wendy. "Maybe he can have lunch with us."

"Yeah! But get ready. The hotel is really ugly," she warned him.

"I'll prepare myself."

Duncan texted Patrick again and made sure they could come over.

"Poor Patrick. It's much better to work at The Kettle," Wendy said as they left to get the car.

The Bartley Hotel wasn't so bad. It was a little drab and boxy. It didn't exactly call attention to itself. The lobby was the same way. You could close your eyes and not miss much, except for the sight of Patrick smiling as he waited for them.

"Hey, look who's ditching work," Patrick said as he opened his arms so Wendy could give him a hug.

"It was Duncan's idea," Wendy ratted him out.

Turning to Duncan with an insinuating smile, Patrick said, "And look at you. You missed me."

Duncan neither confirmed nor denied his accusation.

"I didn't miss you at all," Wendy claimed while still hugging Patrick.

"Can you come to lunch with us?" Duncan asked.

"No. Sorry. But if we eat here, I can," he added knowing it wouldn't sound too appealing.

Duncan must have looked doubtful because Patrick went on to reassure him.

"Don't worry. I know what's good," Patrick said, and he led the way to the hotel restaurant. Along the way, he gave Duncan a quick tour.

The hotel decor definitely wasn't pretentious. A lot of it looked much like the interior of a nice office building. It was geared toward the budget minded business traveler.

Many of the staff they ran into knew Wendy, and they were very welcoming. They eyed Duncan curiously, and some gave him and Patrick knowing smiles. Duncan thought that was odd. He wouldn't

have thought that they looked like a couple, but everyone who worked with Patrick seemed to disagree.

The restaurant was nicer than Duncan expected. The dark wood paneling and the deep colors combined to create a cozy, traditional feel. Here too, the staff knew Wendy and were happy to see her. One of the waiters passed on an invitation from the chef for Wendy to tour the kitchen. No one else was invited though. Wendy promised Duncan a report on what she saw.

"She must come by all the time to visit you," Duncan said since Wendy was known by everyone.

"She used to," Patrick said. "When I first started working here full time, I didn't know what to do when Wendy wasn't at school. If no one else could watch her, I brought her to work with me. Then one day, one of my supervisors said I couldn't bring her here. I had things figured out by then so it was OK."

"It must have been hard in so many ways," Duncan told him. He wanted to take his hand, but he didn't think that was a good idea at his place of work.

"We got through it. Or, I guess, we're still getting through it. A lot of people helped us out. And most people here were very supportive. The chef loves Wendy. She hates me though. She is not a people person. That's why you didn't get a tour."

"Wendy will be my spy," Duncan said. He liked to see professional kitchens. There was always something new to learn and maybe use at the store.

Their orders arrived just as Wendy came back. Patrick had ordered for all of them but didn't tell Duncan what he would be having. Now that the food was in front of him, Patrick told him he was having lemongrass and watercress stuffed sea bass with a salad of field greens with celery and sour apples.

"I saw them make the food," Wendy said. "Now I know why the sandwich is so good. They put a secret sauce on the chicken." She had whispered the part about the secret sauce then eagerly took a big bite of her grilled chicken sandwich.

Patrick was having the same thing, and he seemed to love it too.

"Can I have one of those to go?" Duncan asked their waiter when he stopped by their table.

"I guess I should have ordered you one instead of the fish," Patrick said.

"No. You were right about the fish. It's excellent. The sandwich is so I can figure out the sauce since you both like it so much."

"Keep it down. I told you the chef already hates me. Now you want to steal her recipe?" Patrick said while leaning forward conspiratorially.

"Don't you want me to make it for you?" Duncan asked with a teasing smile.

"You know the way to my heart," Patrick said.

*

Having Duncan and Wendy visit was such a nice surprise. As Duncan's phone vibrated and he stepped away to talk, Patrick watched him. Then he saw Wendy narrowing her eyes at him.

"You better be careful," she warned him.

"Duncan better be careful," Patrick said with a smirk.

"Him too," Wendy agreed, not getting his meaning, thank God.

Patrick couldn't believe that she still disapproved considering how much she liked Duncan.

"So you think there's someone out there who is better than Duncan," Patrick said so he could get some answers out of her.

"Cuter, not better," she clarified.

"I didn't realize I had such a shallow sister. Cute isn't everything," Patrick said since she was blind to the fact that Duncan was scorching hot. "How can anyone be better than Duncan?"

"Not better. Duncan is like the best guy. And he likes to cook."

"So you like him but I'm not allowed to?" Patrick asked.

"You can like him, but don't look at him like he's the cutest puppy you ever saw," Wendy said.

"I definitely won't do that."

"You already did. I saw you."

Patrick hung his head. If anything, he thought he was leering at him. Could he find more ways of embarrassing himself? Looking at Duncan like he was a puppy, oh man. Will the indignities ever end? He looked up sheepishly as Duncan came back to the table.

"Do you have to go back to work?" Duncan asked, misunderstanding his expression.

"Oh, yeah. That's what I do here," Patrick said and got up. "Thanks, you guys." He turned to Duncan to thank him and found himself just smiling at him. Duncan returned the smile. Wendy made a disapproving noise.

"Now you're both doing it," she said.

"What?"

"The puppy thing," she said.

"Do I want to know...?" Duncan started to ask.

"No," Patrick told him and rushed off. He had to get back to work. He wasn't running away before Wendy explained about the puppy thing.

A few days later, Patrick was just coming home from work when he heard Wendy calling him.

"We're in here!" Wendy told him, sticking her head out of Duncan's apartment door.

"I know. Duncan texted me." He was always asking Patrick's permission about Wendy.

"Duncan the Third and I went shopping, and now he's cooking," she told him as they went in.

Patrick knew that they started shopping before it was quitting time so he scolded them.

"You ditched work again. Is she a bad influence on you?" Patrick asked Duncan accusingly when he went into the kitchen.

"I'm my own boss. I can do that," Duncan said.

"And he's my boss so I can do that too," Wendy said.

"You're quite a team," Patrick told them.

Wendy agreed and looked proud of herself and Duncan. Then she showed Patrick what was in the oven.

"Brownies! And they aren't from a box," Wendy said. "And look. Duncan is making caramel. I didn't even know you could make caramel. I thought caramel was just caramel. Duncan the Third can make anything from scratch. Even pizza."

"Did she ask you for your autograph yet?" Patrick asked Duncan.

Smelling something savory, Patrick checked out what Duncan had going next to the saucepan with caramel. Crowding him a little, he looked over his shoulder. He had an indoor grill set up, and something dark was bubbling in the other saucepan.

"Hey, is that the grilled chicken from the restaurant?" Patrick asked, recognizing the smoky, sweet smell.

"Yes," Duncan confirmed it. "But I won't make the sandwiches. We'll have it over snow peas and rice."

"So what's in the secret sauce," Patrick asked leaning into him like they were really going to share a secret.

"My best guess is molasses, a fermented malt beverage and balsamic

vinegar reduction, allspice, and smoked paprika. When it's done you guys can tell me if I'm close."

"It smells good. I can't believe you are going to all this trouble," Patrick said.

"It's no trouble."

"You should open a restaurant," Patrick said as he sniffed at all the wonderful aromas filling the small kitchen.

"I looked into it, but it wasn't for me. I only like cooking for..."

"Huh?" Patrick said, noticing that Duncan trailed off.

Maybe he was going to say for the people he loved. To answer Patrick's questioning look, he said, "I used to cook a lot more."

"Oh," Patrick said.

Even though he said very little, Patrick was sure Duncan was talking about his life with his ex. Patrick wanted to kick that jerk's ass. It was that asshole's fault that he and Duncan weren't destroying his mattress every night with crazy, acrobatic sex.

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Patrick had only just arrived and he had already unsettled Duncan. Standing too close as he asked about the food, he made Duncan feel hot inside and out. Good thing Wendy had more to show him.

"Those are my favorite ones from the store!" she said as she pointed to the new table set with the pear tree placemats and napkins. That's why Duncan had picked them out. He didn't usually use place mats at all.

Once they all sat down at the new, bigger table, which had one more chair than they needed, it was time to taste test the food. Patrick and Wendy had similar expressions of intense concentration as they compared his chicken to the one from the hotel.

"Close," Wendy said.

"Very close," Patrick said as well.

Duncan agreed. It was still missing something and there was too much molasses.

"I think I like this one better," Wendy said, maybe because it was a little sweeter than the one at the hotel.

"Me too," Patrick agreed. The look he gave Duncan proved that his preference was not based on anything to do with food.

The brownies were an even bigger hit, but Wendy dropped her piece. She squealed as she tried to catch it several times, fumbling

each time until it hit the floor.

"Sorry. That was a spaz move," she said as she picked it up, and Duncan cleaned up the floor.

"There's plenty more," he assured her as she sadly threw it away.

What she said reminded him of something she mentioned before.

"The kids at school haven't been calling you any more names, have they?" Duncan asked.

She thought about it.

"Not really. I think they got bored," she said.

Patrick wanted to know what names so she told him.

"They are nincompoops," Patrick said and Wendy burst into a laugh.

"Our grandma used to call people nincompoops. It made Wendy laugh every time," Patrick told Duncan.

Duncan did dishes and Patrick insisted on helping. Not letting her help with the dishes, Duncan sent Wendy to pick out a movie. Patrick was crowding Duncan at the sink, intruding on his space and grinning about it. Duncan couldn't stop worrying about Wendy.

"What about these mean girls?" Duncan asked.

"You think there is a problem?" Patrick asked, getting a little more serious.

"Don't you?"

"Wendy can handle them," Patrick said.

"She's just a kid."

"So are they."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to overstep," Duncan said, realizing it wasn't his place to second-guess Patrick.

"It's OK. I don't mind a little back seat driving. Or backseat action in general."

Duncan was amazed at how he found an opportunity to hit on him at every turn. As Duncan shook his head while smiling despite himself, Patrick predicted, "You are so going to fall for me."

Duncan almost told him that he already did.

When they joined Wendy in the living room, Patrick asked her, "You want me to talk to someone at school about those girls?"

"No. I'll just beat them up," she said with a sweet smile.

"Wendy."

She laughed.

"Just kidding. I won't beat them up, but I totally could if I wanted to," she boasted.

Even though they stayed later than last time, Duncan was safe since Patrick and Wendy left a little after her bedtime. After that, only a short distance separated Duncan from Patrick. Two doors and a length of floor stood between them, but it seemed unthinkable to Duncan to go over there. Just as well since Duncan had been going down a slippery slope. His life was transforming. It was full again, even brimming over. He felt the urge to cook like never before, and not just as an excuse to invite Patrick over and spend time with him. Though he had cooked for Jason, he practically stopped cooking completely once they broke up. Having only started again when he met Patrick and Wendy, Duncan suspected that he was sublimating his feelings for Patrick into making food. But he also knew that no amount of cooking was going to get the job done. The satisfaction he craved could only be found in Patrick's body and beyond that, in the union of their hearts.

Chapter 8

Patrick had been craving Chinese spareribs so he stopped by for some takeout on the way home. He got enough for Ben too. Ben was back on duty because Patrick had to work late just as Duncan had an appointment. As Patrick came through the door of the apartment, Wendy was nowhere to be seen, but Ben had one leg hooked over the back of the couch, the other over the armrest. He was basically upside down. That kid took lounging around to a whole new level. Patrick told him what was on the menu and invited him to stay.

"You sure you don't want to save them for Duncan?" Ben asked with a leer as he straightened up and followed him into the kitchen.

"Duncan is busy," Patrick told him.

"That explains why you aren't being blissfully domestic tonight." Ben rolled his eyes.

"Don't say it like that. It sounds gross."

"You're the one living it," Ben told him.

Wendy came into the kitchen and looked back and forth between them, not sure what Ben was going on about.

"I might take back that dinner invitation. That means more spareribs for me," Patrick told Ben.

"Spareribs, yey!" Wendy said as Patrick took them out of the bag.

"You should keep them warm for your boyfriend. Show him you care," Ben said. He was this close to singing, "Patrick and Duncan sitting in a tree". He was such a child.

"What boyfriend?" Wendy asked.

"Clueless," Ben said to her. "I mean Duncan."

"I'm not clueless. Duncan isn't a boyfriend."

Looking from Patrick to Wendy in surprise, he asked, "She still doesn't want you together? Why is she dragging Duncan in here every minute if she wants to keep you apart?" Ben asked Patrick.

"Because she's nine," Patrick said.

Wendy made a face at both of them. She did not appreciate being talked about like that.

"Won't you miss Duncan when he's gone?" Ben asked Wendy.

"Gone? Where is he going?" she wanted to know.

"He isn't going anywhere," Patrick told Wendy. "What are you talking about?" he asked Ben, who ignored him.

"Nowhere yet. But one day he'll get a boyfriend and he might move

away," Ben predicted, wrongly.

"He won't get a boyfriend. He's too old. No one will want him," Wendy declared.

"What about an old guy like him?" Ben said.

"What are you trying to do?" Patrick asked him.

"Just reading her some tealeaves," Ben said.

"Cut it out."

Not listening to them, Wendy looked worried.

"He can't leave," she said in a small voice.

"He won't, honey. Relax," Patrick tried to tell her, but Ben wasn't done messing with her head.

"If you don't want him to leave, you have to get Patrick to lock him down," Ben said to her.

"Stay out of it, Jailbait," Patrick warned him.

"But..." Wendy started to say, still against the idea for some weird reason that only made sense to her.

"What's Duncan's name?" Ben asked her.

"Duncan's name is Duncan. We're all Duncans. Do you think it's meant to be?" she asked him still not sure. "Just because of his name?"

"Not because of the name," Patrick said. "This is between me and Duncan."

Ben shrugged. Still not listening to a word Patrick said, Wendy was mulling things over.

"Maybe he could be a good boyfriend for Patrick," she said with a thoughtful pout. "He cooks. He can make lunches for Patrick to take to work like Arthur's boyfriend." She seemed to be warming to the idea.

"Am I even in the room?" Patrick asked since both Wendy and Ben were ignoring him as they made decisions about who his boyfriend should be. He did agree with them so it wasn't so bad.

"I decided," Wendy announced. "He can be your boyfriend." Wendy was smiling at Patrick, happy with her decision.

"Umm. OK. It was never up to you, you know, but thanks for the permission," he told her.

All she said was, "What do we do now? How do we lock him down?"

"Wendy, don't jump ahead. This really is between Duncan and me. I mean it when I say stay out of it." He enunciated to try and get through to her, but her eyes were bright with anticipation.

Patrick glared at Ben.

"Just go with it. It's for the greater good," that troublemaker said.

No dinner for him, Patrick decided.

*

When he picked her up from school, Duncan noticed that Wendy was smiling at him in a new way. Since she didn't usually hesitate to speak her mind, he expected he would be hearing her reason soon enough.

"You can have Patrick," she said suddenly. "As a boyfriend, I mean."

"I think Patrick might be his own person," Duncan pointed out.

"No."

Duncan was looking for a parking space and hoping he wouldn't have to continue this conversation at the store.

"It's up to Patrick and me to choose for ourselves when it comes to this kind of thing. OK?" Duncan tried to explain.

"Do you mean you don't want Patrick? Patrick is great, and you're old. You should be happy I'm letting you be his boyfriend," Wendy said. She looked ready to get mad at him if he defied her, but Duncan would have to risk it.

"Thank you for the offer..."

"It's not an offer. You're going to be boyfriends, and you'll make him lunch," Wendy said just as Duncan pulled into a parking spot that was closer to their building than to the store.

"Wendy..." Duncan started to say while staying seated in the car. He really didn't want to have this conversation at the store.

"You have no right not to like Patrick," Wendy told him.

"I like him, honey. I just can't be in a relationship right now," Duncan said. He didn't want to tell her about Jason, but that wasn't what she wanted to know.

"When can you be?"

"I don't know."

"You have to," Wendy said, sounding kind of upset.

"Why all of a sudden?" Duncan asked her.

"So you won't leave."

"I'm not leaving."

"But you will when you find another old guy who doesn't mind that you aren't cute."

"Maybe that's who I'm meant to be with," Duncan said instead of asking what old guy she was talking about.

"No, you're a Duncan. I like you, and you're one of us."

"And I love you guys."

She beamed a beautiful, happy smile at his words. He was going to say that things might not work out the way she wanted, but now he didn't have the heart. His feelings were so mixed up, he was sure he would say the wrong thing. He would have to let Patrick explain it to her.

"I want you to talk to Patrick, and listen to what he has to say," Duncan said.

Wendy frowned. His serious tone made it clear that she wasn't going to hear anything she would like.

*

As he was picking up Wendy from the store, Patrick noticed that Duncan gave him a look. It was somewhere between a warning and an apology. Seeing that Wendy also wore a troubled expression, Patrick knew he was in for it.

"Patrick, I told Duncan he could be your boyfriend, but he said he couldn't be," Wendy summed up while they walked home.

"I told you it wasn't up to you." Patrick spoke in a stern voice, but Wendy looked sad not chastised.

"Why not? I like him a lot."

She seemed to have her heart set on Duncan as his boyfriend now, and Patrick did too. Though he fully intended to change Duncan's mind, he didn't want to raise her hopes. She was already so fond of Duncan. Patrick knew why. It wasn't just that Duncan was a great guy. Wendy wanted to have a family around her again. With Duncan, they could both have that and more.

"Duncan isn't ready," Patrick stated. He wanted it to be the last word on the subject, but Wendy was still arguing.

"That's what he said, but..."

"Wendy, try listening. I know you like Duncan, but he and I can't be together right now. OK?"

"It's not OK," Wendy said. She looked teary eyed.

"Hey, we'll still be friends," Patrick assured her, smoothing down her hair.

"No. I can't be friends with Duncan if he doesn't like you," Wendy said in a low voice. She looked very serious. Patrick knew that look, and he knew better than to try to talk her out of what she was feeling.

"That's your decision. I'm still going to be friends with Duncan," Patrick said to her.

"Suit yourself," Wendy said.

"Feel free to change your mind any time." Patrick kissed the top of her head. He could tell how sad it made her to be mad at Duncan. He knew her anger wouldn't last, but she didn't.

*

It was the next day, Saturday, when Duncan saw Wendy again. He saw her coming up from the mailboxes, and she was limping a little as she came to stand next to Duncan in the elevator.

"What's wrong with your leg?" Duncan asked her.

He could see now that she skinned her knee.

"How did that happen?" he asked her.

"I don't need you. I have Patrick," Wendy said, not looking at him.

"OK."

She lifted her chin and wouldn't speak to him for the rest of the ride. As she stepped out of the elevator, she turned to him.

"And I'm not a little kid. When I scrape my knee, I don't cry about it. I just slap a band-aid on it," she said defiantly.

"You should disinfect it first. I'll bring you some peroxide. It won't sting," Duncan told her.

"Don't do me any favors, Mr. Jeffries," she said and walking away angrily. She stopped at the apartment door. "And I'm not going to be able to work for you any more." She looked sad as she said that.

"I'm sorry to hear that. You're welcome at The Copper Kettle any time," Duncan told her.

Wendy only pouted as she went in.

A little later, Patrick stopped by his place.

"Wendy said she saw you earlier. I wanted to see if you survived," Patrick said.

"I guess she's mad at me." It hurt more than Duncan expected.

"She'll get over it," Patrick said to him and touched his arm reassuringly.

"She called me Mr. Jeffries," Duncan said.

"Ouch. It's my fault. I told her we are a no go, which is a lie. I was just being cautious with her. We are so going to happen," Patrick said

with an overconfident grin.

"I should have told her myself, but..."

"No. She's my sister. But if you're looking for someone to blame, you can blame Ben."

"What did he do?"

"He told Wendy that you might leave when you find a boyfriend. It kind of scared me too to think that there was some guy out there you would think is perfect, and that he would take you away." Patrick gave him an accusing look like there was an actual guy.

"That won't happen," Duncan said seriously. Then he frowned. He meant what he said, but he knew there was only one way to guarantee it. If he could just get past his doubts and say yes to everything Patrick wanted. He still wanted to reassure Patrick so he said, "Just know that I'm not going anywhere." He felt sure of his words even if he couldn't live up to them yet.

Pushing aside thoughts of the future, Duncan turned the conversation to practical matters.

"What are you going to do about Monday after school if she still doesn't want to stay with me at the store?"

"I already talked to one of my friends. Don is free Monday. He does volunteer work delivering meals for Glad Hands Kitchen with his boyfriend."

"I know that place. We donate equipment to them."

"Don is going to take Wendy with them on their deliveries. Wendy is pretty excited about it."

Duncan looked down.

"Buck up. Three days tops, then she'll stop being mad at you. I know her. She's a lot like me. She doesn't sit around and brood over a decision. When she likes someone, she likes them and that's it."

"She doesn't like me very much right now," Duncan reminded him.

"She's just mad because you're a big jerk. I'm paraphrasing," Patrick said trying to claim innocence. Then he got serious. "I've tried to be her family all by myself, but she needs more."

"And you want to give her that," Duncan said. He suspected that was part of the reason why Patrick thought Duncan was the right man for him.

"I'm not that generous. I want that for myself. See, I found this perfect guy..."

"Let me guess, he refuses to fall for your dimpled charms," Duncan said.

"Oh, no. He falls for my charms every time. I could have him right now. Up against a wall, on the floor, or on any piece of furniture you care to name. He just won't commit," Patrick said with a wicked look in his eyes.

Duncan had to admit that his boast was only the truth. Even now if he made a move, Duncan would succumb and leave the regrets for later. Anything Patrick wanted, any way he wanted it, Duncan was his even as some part of his heart held back, still raw and fearful of more pain. As he thought about that, he stared into Patrick's eyes too long. The wicked look was gone from his eyes. They just looked mellow and loving, not asking anything of Duncan, just taking him in.

*

Patrick was lost in thought as he got back to the apartment. Or he might have been lost in Duncan's eyes. God, they were beautiful. Spacing out over Duncan, Patrick almost missed the accusing glare Wendy was shooting his way. Patrick confirmed where he was.

"Yes. I was with Duncan just now."

"Whyyyy?" she asked.

"Because I like him, a lot, and I'm not the one who's mad at him."

From her determined, frowning face, he could tell that she was trying her best to stay mad at Duncan, but her eyes told a different story.

"Are you really sure you like him because I'm really mad at him?" she asked. Her anger had no heat. It was purely stubbornness at this point. Getting over being mad at someone in one day, that would be a record for her.

"Being mad at someone doesn't mean you stop liking them," Patrick told her.

"Can you even like a guy if he isn't cute?" she wondered.

"Well, Dad wasn't cute and Mom loved him."

"That's so true," Wendy agreed. Their dad was proud of his "goofy good looks" as he called them.

"And Duncan looks plenty cute to me. Maybe because I'm not a little girl," Patrick said.

"Why does he have to be so stubborn?" Wendy asked without a shred of self-awareness.

"Look who's talking," Patrick said. "So you'd miss The Copper Kettle?"

"I miss Duncan," she said honestly.

"I didn't expect you to admit it."

"Was I wrong to get mad at him?" Wendy asked.

"Not exactly. You feelings are your own, but he has a right to his own feelings too. We need to respect that."

"But you're not giving up, are you?" she asked, a little alarmed.

"No. I'm not. Have some faith in Duncan. OK?" He wanted to say "I won't give up because I can't let him go no matter what." But he was keeping things low key for her.

"I don't want to be mad at Duncan the Third any more," she decided.

"You're a good kid and a good sister. If you want, you can go make up with Duncan right now," Patrick told her.

The look on her face was pure joy then she got serious again.

"I'll go and do that." She stood very straight and walked to the door. Patrick followed her and leaned in their doorway as she went over to Duncan's door.

"Don't spy on me," she said, seeing Patrick lurking there.

"I just want to make sure he's home," Patrick lied. He wanted to see them make up.

Duncan opened the door and looked overjoyed to see Wendy standing there.

"He's home. Now go away." Wendy told Patrick.

Patrick sighed, and Duncan gave him a consoling smile. Closing the door for Wendy's benefit, Patrick pulled it open again quietly so he could at least eavesdrop.

*

Duncan was so happy to see that it was Wendy at his door. Even before she said anything, he could tell by the look on Patrick's face that he was out of the doghouse.

"Hi, Duncan," Wendy said a little shyly as she stood on his doormat. "Sorry I got mad at you for not wanting to be Patrick's boyfriend."

"It's OK."

"It's my fault anyway," she blurted out. "I screwed up. I shouldn't have been shallow and ageist. I'm sorry."

"Honey, trust me, this isn't on you. I'm just not ready for a relationship."

"Get ready."

"I will. But it may take a while."

"OK. I'll make Patrick wait for you. I won't let him date anyone else."

"That's not fair," Duncan told her.

"Sure it is. Don't worry. I'll keep Patrick safe from all the other guys even if they're really cute and not old. Patrick said to have faith in you so I'll do that. But you better not mess up."

"I'll try," Duncan promised.

"OK. We have a deal."

Suddenly she hugged him.

"Is that instead of a handshake?" Duncan asked her.

"I miss you," she said.

"I was right here," Duncan said, feeling touched.

"Yeah," she said getting serious again as she stepped back. "That's where you always have to be – right here with us. Don't forget that. You don't want to cross me," she warned him.

"No, I don't."

Now Patrick came out into the hallway to smile at both of them.

"Stop being a sneak," Wendy told him.

Chapter 9

Late one Friday afternoon, Patrick noticed that Duncan's front door was ajar. He heard a noise at the end of the hall. Every floor had its own storage unit there. That's where Patrick spotted Duncan. He was busy moving boxes around when Patrick got his attention.

"I need to make some room. I'm clearing out some stuff from my house and putting it here," Duncan explained as Patrick helped him set one box on top of another.

"House?" Patrick asked, wondering about the significance of that. The sad look on Duncan's face told him he was on the right track when he suspected that the house was tied to his last relationship. Then Duncan told him straight out.

"The house is in Deerbourne. I moved there with someone, but it didn't work out."

"Sorry," Patrick said. He could tell that Duncan didn't want to say more about this failed relationship, and he wasn't about to pry.

"It's about time I put it up for sale. I need to get it ready. I'll be doing that this weekend."

"If you run out of room, you can use our storage space. We don't have much in there," Patrick offered.

"Thanks."

"Deerbourne is a nice area. There is a creek and a pond right?" Patrick said. He had only glimpsed it while driving in that direction. It looked idyllic, at least from a distance.

"That's right. It's really nice. Do you want to go see it?" Duncan said, surprising Patrick.

"Really? That would be great. I wasn't happy to hear you weren't going to be around this weekend. Are you sure?" Patrick asked, worried that by showing too much interest, he had forced the invitation from him.

"We'll go Saturday morning if you like," Duncan said, showing him he was sure.

"I wonder who I can get to watch Wendy." Patrick pretended to be thinking hard.

"She's invited too," Duncan told him though Patrick already knew it.

"And I was getting indecent ideas. But I get those either way."

"I noticed. Saturday morning. Is nine OK?"

"We'll be ready."

As he went to his own apartment to let Wendy know about

Saturday, Patrick found himself wondering what this other guy was like. From what Duncan said, the guy was young like him, but what else? He was a jerk and an idiot if he let Duncan get away. That's not a mistake Patrick was going to make. Being with Duncan just felt right. No matter how much he had liked a guy before, he had never been this driven, this happy, or this scared to lose him.

*

Afterward, Duncan wondered what he had been thinking. Whenever he tried to put some distance between them, his resolve fell apart at the first sight of Patrick. In anticipation of tomorrow, Duncan could hardly sleep. He was overheated and sleepless, kicking off the covers to try and cool off. And the whole time, he wanted Patrick to come over and make him even hotter. They would be sweaty and exhausted. Their bodies would slowly stop moving then come together in sleep. These weren't calming thoughts. Restless and awake, he was waiting for Patrick to kiss his eyelids closed; otherwise, he felt he would never get any sleep.

In contrast, Duncan remembered how cold this past winter had seemed to him in his empty bed. He was really chilled from the inside. Forcing himself to get out of bed on those cold, dark mornings with nothing to look forward to, he functioned purely on autopilot. He had moved into the apartment to feel less alone. Whenever he pictured it, the house was surrounded by snow, the pond frozen, the spring only a trickle amid ice and snow. The cold empty space stretched out in every direction with all signs of life far away. Spending the winter there was unthinkable.

Living in town didn't seem much better. The weather seeped inside him, gloomy and cold, his days interchangeable. Disheartened, living in a drab apartment, he couldn't have imagined that only months later he would feel like he was on fire, overwhelmed by new feelings. It was too soon to get his heart broken again when it didn't even have time to heal. But that was the fate he didn't seem able or willing to escape.

*

Patrick looked forward to the outing to visit Duncan's house although he hoped it wouldn't be too sad for him. The next morning, the three of them were ready to pile into Duncan's olive green, classic Land Rover Discovery. It was a nice day with only a few puffy, unthreatening clouds. While Duncan put some supplies in the trunk,

food and drink mostly, Wendy tried to call shotgun.

"Kids sit in the back, shorty," Patrick told her.

Wendy growled at him. She tried to appeal to Duncan since it was his car. Recognizing a long-standing sibling argument when he saw one, Duncan stayed out of it. He did compliment Wendy's flowery dress.

"Patrick said to wear it because it's good for pictures."

"Good thinking," Duncan said and gave Patrick a small smile. He seemed even more subdued than usual, and that worried Patrick. Maybe he regretted his invitation.

Patrick stopped before he got in the car.

"Maybe it's better if we take our car? That way you can stay as long as you need to, and you don't have to worry about bringing us back," Patrick said to give him an easy way to get rid of them.

Duncan's face fell a little as he started to say, "If you..."

"No. That wastes gas. We need to carpool," Wendy said.

Duncan smiled at Wendy and said to Patrick, "It's up to you."

"You heard her. We have to do what's good for the environment." Patrick was glad to get into the car next to Duncan. By the happier look on his face, he could tell Duncan didn't want to get rid of them. Patrick was relieved since he had a good feeling about today.

The roads weren't too busy and the drive was nice. When they got on Deerbourne Road, Patrick knew they were close. They passed nice houses spread out on lots of land then turned onto a curving, dirt road that took them to Duncan's house. Bushes with small leaves and even smaller flowers lined the road. As they approached the house, Wendy stuck her head between the front seats to get a better look.

"It's a big house, and it's pretty," Wendy said when the house came into view.

It was a single story house with a wide porch and a lush garden. The creamy beige paint was only a little weather-beaten. The roof was reddish-orange. Even with the window shades drawn, the house looked inviting.

"Look at all the flowers," Wendy said when she got out of the car and got a good look at the garden. The garden looked a little wild and overgrown, but that meant there was a riot of colorful flowers in bloom.

"I've been neglecting them," Duncan said and looked at the plants sadly.

"They look nice anyway," Wendy said and leaned down for a closer

look. She liked the garden as it was, the more flowers the better.

"My ex said the garden needed some color," Duncan said softly so only Patrick could hear while Wendy admired the plants.

"What's that nice smell?" Wendy asked.

"That's jasmine. The one with the small, white flowers," Duncan told her and pointed it out.

The branches of one big shrub were heavy with big bunches of pink flowers. They drew Wendy's eye, the way jasmine had drawn the attention of her nose.

"What kind of flowers are those?" she asked Duncan.

"I don't know. That plant was already here when I got the house," Duncan said.

"We should cut some and put them in a vase," Wendy said and Duncan agreed.

They circled the house before going in. Now that he was seeing the house from all sides. Patrick saw that the porch wrapped all the way around. Wendy went in circles a few times as if to prove it. Patrick took in the view on each side. They all had something to offer. He noticed that there was a porch swing on the west side, perfect for watching the sunset. Everywhere he looked only convinced Patrick that this house was built for enjoying everything that surrounded it, for enjoying life.

When they were ready to go in, Duncan unlocked the front door, which opened onto a hallway. From there, they went into a large living room. In the middle of it was a fireplace surrounded by a stone shelf and a chimney column in the same stone. The fireplace was open on two sides. Wendy went all around and peered through the opening.

"Can we light a fire?" she asked.

"It's too warm for that," Duncan told her.

The furniture was traditional in style but very comfortable looking. Patrick could imagine that it was very nice to sit there on a cold evening with the fire making the room glow as it warmed it.

Wendy kept going from room to room then back again while Patrick let Duncan lead him on a tour of the place more slowly. Duncan opened blinds and windows as they went. With every window he opened, the house became more cheerful.

"You have a/c," Patrick noticed.

"I had it put in. Jason insisted on it."

Whenever Duncan mentioned Jason, Patrick could tell that he hesitated to say the name. It obviously still caused him pain. It was

too bad that unpleasant memories kept him from enjoying this place.

Duncan's bedroom was of particular interest to Patrick. He tried to catch Duncan's eye then remembered that he shared that bed with his ex. It was a four-poster bed with a headboard and a footboard. It looked solid, old and like it was made simply but with quality workmanship. Patrick was dying to test out its structural integrity with some intense fucking and drive even the faintest memory of that other guy right out of the room. Patrick was intensely jealous of that man. He obviously hurt Duncan, and that was just unforgivable. Even if Patrick didn't know the details, he felt comfortable taking Duncan's side.

Every room in the house was full of charming, old furniture that Wendy liked at first sight. They met up with her in the office. A couch covered in cracked olive green leather was next to a bookshelf with glass doors. It was filled with old, leather and cloth bound volumes. The desk was set into the corner so it got light from two windows. There was something about the office that was very Duncan.

"Did Stacy help you decorate?" Wendy asked.

"She did. She found a lot of nice things. She found that desk over there."

It was an old roll-top desk, and at first, Wendy didn't look very impressed with it. Duncan rolled it up. It stuck a little then it was open, and Wendy could see all the cubbyholes.

"Look at all the nooks and crannies. There's a million of them. It's a great desk," she told Duncan.

"I was thinking of taking it to the apartment," Duncan said as he looked at it fondly.

"No, it belongs here," Wendy said.

"Honey, he's selling the place," Patrick reminded her.

"Oh, right." She looked sad.

"Not right away," Duncan told her to make her feel better.

"It's a good house. Make sure someone nice buys it," Wendy instructed him.

"As long as they are also the highest bidder," Patrick said.

As Wendy continued to wander through the house, Patrick and Duncan hung back. Then Patrick told him, "The bank repossessed Mom and Dad's house after they died. It was heavily mortgaged. My grandmother was seriously ill for years, and Mom and Dad were paying a lot of her bills. That's probably why Wendy doesn't want you

to sell."

"Now I wish she didn't know I was selling," Duncan said.

"She'll be OK."

Patrick agreed with her about the house. It was too bad Duncan was selling. The house was so completely different from Duncan's apartment. While the apartment was gray, the house was full of warm colors, and it just invited the sunshine in. It was like two completely different men lived in those two places. Patrick wanted to know that other Duncan, the one who wanted to spend the rest of his life in this house with the man he loved. He didn't ask him about it. He hoped Duncan would open up on his own and tell him what this house meant to him, the good and the bad. Until then, he would be considerate of Duncan's feelings.

Once again, they went outside. The view depended on where you turned your head. No wonder the porch went all around. Far away to the left, three silos rose against the sky but not much else other than open fields stretched on, occasionally marked off by low fences. Turning a bit more, Patrick saw mountains in the distance that looked like they hung above the low clouds. One big tree on a gentle hill dominated the view. To the right, evergreens obscured one part of the town while skyscrapers towered above. In the other direction, he saw roofs of house parted by a variety of trees. Tall grasses hid the pond that Duncan pointed out. They could see the creek as it emptied into it. Upstream, the creek was hidden by trees. As Wendy and Duncan decided which way to go, Patrick just stood, amazed. What a place to live. What a place to leave.

Chapter 10

Duncan was worried that it would be harder to visit the house in the company of Patrick and Wendy. All the bad feelings it brought up would be magnified under the spotlight of their curious eyes. It was nothing like that though. Having the two of them there eased the pain of seeing the house again. On every other visit to the house, he had been overwhelmed with a desire to see the place torn down. Then he would feel miserable that he could even think of such a thing. It was a wonderful house. Even if he didn't want it, someone deserved to be happy there.

This time the sight of the place that should have been his home caused him minimal pain. It was only an echo of the anguish he experienced on previous visits, and it didn't last. Duncan mostly felt pride that Patrick and Wendy liked his dream house, or was it his former dream house. It surprised him, but he couldn't help being pleased to see their smiling faces as they looked around. They saw the house the same way he once did. It almost took him back to those hope filled days.

After they had a look at the house, exploring the surrounding areas was next. They walked over fields sprinkled with blossoms. Most of them were small, but each one got Wendy's attention, at least for a while. Patrick couldn't take his eyes off the view in the distance.

"You own this place and you live in a drab little apartment just like ours," Patrick said though he knew a little about the reason for Duncan's choice.

When Duncan didn't say anything, Patrick didn't press for any answers. He kept taking in the view as if he could breathe it in like the fresh air and the scent of greenery and flowers.

Seeing the evergreens in the distance, Patrick touched his arm to get his attention and Duncan shuddered. He hoped Patrick didn't notice.

"Are we on the other side of Blue Spruce Park?" Patrick asked.

"Yes. That's it over there."

"They have those picnic tables. We used to go with Mom and Dad to have picnics in the summer. It's pretty small isn't it?" Patrick said with a puzzled look, seeing that the park didn't extend very far. "When I was little, I thought it went on forever."

Patrick had on a wistful smile. Even Duncan could see their family eating at one of the picnic tables under the cool shade of the old spruce trees.

"When it snowed, we'd go to see the big Christmas trees," Patrick said. "Dad would say he was going to cut down one of the big trees so we could take it home and decorate it. I used to fall for that when I was little. But Wendy knew right away that they wouldn't fit in the house. You should have heard her at three years old telling him, 'Daddy, they're too big.'"

"Smart kid."

"I know. Dad played so many tricks on me. Then Wendy came along, and she hardly fell for any of them." Patrick looked put out.

The subject of their conversation was running back to them now.

"Can I run in my bare feet?" Wendy asked breathlessly.

"No," Duncan said right away. "Something might bite her," he said to Patrick to explain that quick no.

"Are there snakes or something?" Patrick said as Wendy looked all around her feet.

"I don't know," Duncan told them. "I've never seen any. I just don't want to take a chance."

"He's overprotective," Wendy decided.

"No," Patrick told her. "He's just the right amount of protective."

Despite his words, Patrick gave Duncan a look showing him that he agreed with Wendy.

Ahead of them, a big tree grew on a small hill. It was almost like the tree had pulled up the earth around it to create that hill. Under the deep shade of its wide canopy, its roots stuck up all around, tick and gnarly.

"This tree is really old, isn't it?" Wendy said stretching out her arms to measure its girth. "It's the kind of tree you put a tree house in."

"It is, isn't it," Duncan said looking up at the canopy that blocked the sun. He smiled picturing a tree house in the midst of those branches.

"If I wasn't wearing a dress, I could climb way up," Wendy boasted. "Next time, tree!"

As she made her promise, looking at the tree as if it had issued her a challenge, Duncan was a little worried. If she did climb, he could see himself standing underneath with his arms outstretched, ready to catch her.

"I think I would be a nightmare as a parent," Duncan said as Wendy went all around the huge tree trunk. He hadn't necessarily meant to say it out loud, but being at the house brought back his long ago plans for the future, children and all.

"You would be great at it," Patrick disagreed.

"I would make my kid wear a bike helmet and a hazmat suit at all times," Duncan told him.

"No, you wouldn't. You have good instincts. You'd know when to hold tight and when to let go," Patrick predicted.

Duncan turned and saw so much faith in his eyes, for a minute he felt like he could do anything as long as this man was by his side. He quickly turned away from him to see Wendy peering at a bird as it landed on a nearby branch.

"I think there's a nest. She keeps going to the same spot right there," Wendy said.

"I'll climb up and see if I can take a picture, maybe even video," Patrick offered.

"No," Wendy objected. "You'll scare the baby birds."

"OK. Then I won't," Patrick said.

Duncan doubted there were any baby birds yet, but it was nice of her not to want to disturb them.

"She's a thoughtful kid," he said to Patrick.

"She is," Patrick said as he looked at her and smiled proudly.

Duncan gazed at her too and thought about his dreams for a family. When he found the house and imagined himself living there, he saw glimpses of a child that might complete his happy family. With everything that happened with Jason, Duncan had almost forgotten how strong that vision was when it first came to him. Since then it had faded. Now a child was here. Duncan was so glad he could share the place with her and Patrick and that being here made her happy.

Next they had a quick lunch. Wendy was in a hurry to keep exploring so they headed toward the pond right after. Looking behind a clump of tall grass, Wendy found a small shrub with scalloped, yellow flowers. It was tucked in and almost invisible.

"It was hiding," she said as she showed them her find.

"You want to pick them?" Duncan asked her.

"No, they look nice where they are."

Duncan admired her wish not to disturb things but leave them as she found them. She didn't take many pictures either. When Duncan asked her why, she said, "Really cool things like that never look as good in pictures. And I have a pretty good memory."

Patrick mostly snapped pictures of Wendy, occasionally sneaking one of Duncan.

Leading the way, Duncan showed them the best approach to the pond. Long grass grew close to the pond, some of it sticking out from the edge of the water.

"There are some muddy spots hidden under the grass, especially where the stream empties into it. It's mosquito heaven, unfortunately," he told them.

The pond was greenish, surrounded by cattails and small shrubs. There was a marshy area where the creek spread out, slowing its quick flowing water as it spilled into the still pond.

They decided to follow the creek upstream. Along the way they came across more and more trees. One tree grew almost sideways, and Wendy tilted her head as she looked it.

"I think a storm must have uprooted it partway, but it just kept growing," Duncan told her.

"That's a brave tree," Wendy said.

"Yes, it is."

The trees surrounded the creek until they became a sun-dappled forest. Wendy jumped over the narrow parts of the creek a few times then raised her arms in triumph.

"Can I take my shoes off and step in?"

"No, there might be eels," Patrick said, mocking Duncan a little for his overprotectiveness.

Wendy was looking from one to the other, worried that she was being made fun of, not Duncan. After finding some good rocks to sit on, they all took their shoes off and stuck their feet in.

"Cold!" Wendy yelled and splashed her feet.

Patrick laughed at her then looked above his head. A tree branch fanned out above them. Duncan saw that it would be flowering soon. Reaching up, Patrick brushed his fingers over the leaves shaped like feathers and the buds, still closed.

It was now late afternoon and they slowly meandered over the fields toward the house.

"I can't believe you used to live here," Patrick said as the house came into view.

Duncan hadn't told him enough to make him understand his choice to leave. He wasn't sure he should.

"Me either," Duncan said. For him, it wasn't disbelief as much as disillusionment. The house and everything it stood for were a mirage. Just a pretty picture someone painted of a place that never existed.

"It's so nice. Why does it make you sad?" Wendy asked as she looked up at him and his dark expression.

"Don't pry," Patrick told her.

She frowned at Patrick, but she let the question go unanswered. Noticing some small flowers that grew low to the ground, she went to check them out. A butterfly flew up as she got close.

"I knew I was going to see a butterfly," Wendy exclaimed as the pale yellow butterfly fluttered around until it landed on a small bush.

"You might see more," Duncan told her.

As if the butterfly was a signal to her, Wendy turned to Duncan and asked, "Can we stay here the whole weekend? Can we?"

"Don't invite yourself," Patrick told her. "And don't ask him. I'm in charge of you."

"I don't mind," Duncan said. "I could use the extra time to get the place in shape, and I'd like the company. You're welcome to stay, and there's plenty of room."

Wendy started to celebrate then looked at Patrick, daring him to say no. He kept her in suspense for a little bit then he said yes.

They walked in no hurry to get anywhere. Along Deerbourne Road, the skinny tops of trees waved at the sky. The grass rustled, combed by a cool breeze. In her flowery dress, Wendy looked like nature's own child. The wind picked up and swept over the tall grass. The tree branches swayed, and Wendy's hair flew back. She smiled at the sensation, and Patrick put his arm around her shoulders.

Duncan reached for his phone to take a picture, but his phone felt strange and cold in his hand. He would follow Wendy's example and keep this moment only as a memory.

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As the day wore on, Patrick had been hoping that they could stay the night, but he didn't want to pressure Duncan that much. He was glad Wendy did. She was a good little sister even if she didn't know about his agenda. The day spent exploring was great, but Patrick hoped he would get some alone time with Duncan.

Coming back from their walk, they got to see the house framed by trees and the view of the town, which was closer than it seemed while they were exploring nature. Patrick knew that the area was protected from further building and development for now, but he wondered how long it would last. One day it might turn into just another suburb.

When Duncan went into the house to get them drinks, Wendy

insisted on helping. Patrick circled the house, going to the back where Duncan told him drinks would be served. The house didn't have a fence to mark off the yard. It was roughly defined by trees and shrubs that had been planted a little more regularly than was natural. Without a fence, it looked like the yard went on forever to the west. To one side, there was a wooden shed surrounded by bushes so that it was inconspicuous. Sheltered under some trees was a long wooden table with benches on either side. Seeing it made Patrick's chest tighten with a flood of memories of all the times with family around a big table, his grandmother and his parents especially. All of them would be teasing each other and laughing. He wondered if anything like that ever happened at this table. Nice, big trees shaded it on all sides. The branches only let in sunlight in patches that patterned the table like loose bunches of golden grapes. Duncan and Wendy came out – Duncan with two beers, Wendy with a glass of juice on ice. At that moment, Patrick thought Duncan armed with a beer for each of them was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. Handing him a beer, Duncan showed Patrick what was in the locked shed besides various tools and gardening supplies.

"Damn," Patrick said when he saw the big grill. He started salivating right away. Then he downed almost half his beer.

"You were thirsty and also dying for some barbeque?" Duncan guessed.

"Yes!" Wendy answered for both of them.

Patrick tried to warn her not to be demanding, but Duncan volunteered to go buy some meat and grill it for dinner. Patrick said he would get the grill ready to be used by the time he got back.

Patrick wheeled out the grill and familiarized himself with how it worked. When he stepped inside the house, he caught Wendy redecorating. She was moving knickknacks around in the living room.

"You need to put those back the way you found them," Patrick told her.

"They look better like this."

"Wendy, whose house is this?" Patrick asked her sternly.

"Duncan's," she said, pouting.

"Stop rearranging Duncan's stuff. Now come help me clean off the table outside."

"I just want to make the place nice," she said as she followed him.

"It's already nice."

"I know, but Duncan the Third needs a lot of help."

"What would he do without you?" Patrick mocked her.

"I know," she agreed enthusiastically. "It's like at the store. I know where everything is, and I can sell anything because I'm pushy. I can sell snow to an Inuit."

"Is that how Duncan put it?"

"Call him Duncan the Third."

"No."

"Come on," Wendy urged him.

Duncan came back with steaks and meat for hamburgers. Patrick told him he overdid it. Wendy's choice was a hamburger. Patrick wanted steak. So that kind of proved Duncan right. When it was time to grill, Patrick tried to assert himself. He and Duncan jostled for control of the grill, disagreeing over flip time and technique.

"You guys behave!" Wendy warned them. "That's real fire you're playing with, and I don't see a fire extinguisher."

"There are three inside," Duncan told her sheepishly. Under her glare, he went to get one and showed Wendy how it worked while Patrick got to grill meat his way.

They grilled some vegetables too, as well as the buns for the burgers. Then it was time to sit down and eat.

"This is like when we lived at the house," Wendy said. She looked teary eyed for a second then took a bit bite of her burger to cover up her sadness.

Patrick didn't hide his feelings as he gave her a melancholy smile.

"It's funny how happy memories can make you sad," Patrick said to let her know he felt the same way.

"But not too sad," Wendy said. "We had good times. And Mom and Dad were funny." Turning to Duncan she said, "Dad loved corn from the grill and put lots of butter on it. Mom would always tell him, 'It's supposed to be corn with butter not butter with corn.' And he had a funny apron. It had a chef on it with his chef's hat on fire. And it said, 'What's cooking good-looking?'"

Patrick remembered that apron and the way Dad would wiggle his eyebrows at Mom whenever she scolded him. She would shake her head and say, "Look at those caterpillars." Like Wendy, Patrick wanted to be able to celebrate the happy times with their parents even as he missed them.

He told the story of the annual 4th of July cooking competition their parents had with the next door neighbors.

"That's where you get your competitive spirit," Duncan said.

"Not just me. Wendy too. When she was four, and our parents lost the competition, she chased the neighbor all over the yard to take the winning ribbon away from him."

Wendy looked embarrassed and glared at Patrick.

"Remember in *Fried Green Tomatoes* when they barbequed that guy?" Wendy said.

"Nice topic of conversation, Wendy," Patrick said, and she giggled.

When Duncan looked confused, Patrick explained. "It was Mom's favorite movie. Wendy can quote every line."

"Not every line. Only the good ones," Wendy said then she quoted the one about being old and having more insurance.

After dinner, Duncan brought out a cherry pie he had bought and made Wendy smile. Then he brought out two other pies, peach and apple.

"I didn't know what you guys liked," he told Patrick when he looked at him.

"You got three pies because you didn't know what we liked?"

Instead of answering, Duncan set down a can of whipped cream.

"I like how you do things, Duncan the Third," Wendy praised him.

When they went in to do the dishes, warm, ruddy light of the evening filled the house. Soon they would have to turn on some lights. They went out on the porch and enjoyed the view of the sky as it grew colorful before the light faded. The porch lights were now on as they sat on the porch swing. They felt lazy and content, watching the sky darken and the stars start to come out.

"Wow, it gets dark out there," Wendy noticed. She was looking straight ahead and there were no lights visible in that direction, just a star filled sky reaching down to a dark world.

"You can see lights over there," Patrick told her. He pointed to the right.

"It's far."

"Not too far. That's the center of town."

When the only thing left to see were the stars and the lights in the distance, they went inside and settled to watch a movie. Duncan voted for *Fried Green Tomatoes*. Wendy seconded that. Patrick was outvoted before he even had his say.

While watching, Duncan enjoyed Wendy's reactions more than the

actual movie. She shouted out all the good lines. Duncan frowned overprotectively during the more intense scenes and looked over at Patrick.

"Mom let her watch it when she was five."

Wendy shushed them. The way Duncan watched out for Wendy, even if he overdid it, only confirmed to Patrick that he was an amazing and wonderful man.

Patrick made sure to brush Duncan's hand when he handed him the snack mix they were sharing. With Wendy sitting between them, Patrick couldn't do much more. He did stretch his hand over the back of the sofa to sneak his fingertips inside the collar of Duncan's t-shirt, tickling the nape of his neck. Duncan put up with it stoically and only shot Patrick an occasional glare. With beautiful eyes like Duncan's even a glare was a treat.

Chapter 11

During the movie, Patrick did not behave himself. When Duncan glared at him, he only smiled as if Duncan was blowing him kisses. He couldn't deny that he enjoyed Patrick's mischief. The brush of his fingertips sent a wave of heat through him. He was being seduced by degrees. Casual touches lingered and heated his skin as if he was being branded with Patrick's fingerprints. It was like a promise that Patrick would revisit those marks and claim Duncan as his. Under the influence of a day spent together in a place that meant so much to him, good and bad, Duncan wasn't sure he could resist him.

At Wendy's bedtime, Duncan let her choose one of his t-shirts to sleep in. Looking at the mostly empty drawer where five or six t-shirts lingered, Wendy frowned over all the gray ones he had. She picked one that said Big Boss. It was given to him by one of his friends when he bought The Copper Kettle. When he told Wendy about that, she liked it even better. Duncan told her she could keep it, and Patrick gave him the same look as when he brought out the extra pies.

"Wendy in that Big Boss t-shirt is too on the nose," Patrick said as he came back from the guest room where Wendy was sleeping.

Joining Duncan on the living room couch, he sat close. He wasn't crowding Duncan, but he was making him very aware of his body, the power trapped inside it, the heat and sexual energy ready to be unleashed.

"Do I get one of your t-shirts to sleep in?" Patrick asked, flirting shamelessly. "The one you're wearing now is fine. I'll take the pants too."

Duncan sighed. He didn't know how he would survive the night.

"You were counting on Wendy to chaperone, but you forgot that she has an early bedtime?" Patrick accused him. He was turned toward Duncan, but there was still no contact between them.

"I guess I'm at your mercy now," Duncan said.

"Damn right. If I used a subtle approach, you would just ignore me."

"I could never ignore you."

Patrick smiled as if he didn't already know that Duncan couldn't keep his eyes or his mind off him. It was a miracle he could keep his hands to himself when they could be roaming Patrick's body.

"You're not worried you might be fighting a losing battle?" Duncan asked him. To him, Patrick seemed a little reckless, blind to danger.

"What battle? I'm not the enemy, I'm the guy who's going to make you happy," Patrick said.

"My doubts are based on experience," Duncan told him. "I was seriously involved with someone. While I thought we were exclusive and forever, Jason cheated on me for most of our relationship. He was too young for the kind of total commitment I wanted. I was blinded by my own plans for our future, and he didn't have the backbone to set me straight. When I finally found out, he told me that he didn't want what I wanted. I think he only wanted a little bit of security, someone to come home to. But he also wanted the freedom to sleep with other men. He knew I would never agree to that, so he went behind my back. It was when we moved out here that it all came out. With the longer trip into town, it wasn't as easy for him to hide what he was doing, to explain his absences."

"I'm sorry."

"We were supposed to be happy here. Instead..." Duncan trailed off. His eyes roamed the big room blindly as he tried not to remember sitting there with Jason, believing his lies.

"That's why you need to sell this house," Patrick said. His voice cut right through the bitter memories, bringing Duncan to the sweet, dangerous present and the man next to him.

"Are you really ready to give up this place?" Patrick asked.

Duncan wasn't sure. He wasn't just giving up the place. He was giving up on everything it represented. It wasn't easy to give up a dream.

"I've been dragging my feet because I feel like I am selling off the last shred of hope I have," Duncan confessed.

"If you don't need the money, wait till you're ready. In the meantime, put your hope somewhere else." Now Patrick turned from serious to teasing. He gave Duncan a searing look. He wanted to be Duncan's hope.

"Back on that, are we?" Duncan said. His voice was huskier than he expected. Patrick's demanding gaze was like a hand on his crotch.

"Always. Until you give me some. Then I'll come after you even harder," Patrick promised.

"Don't dismiss what I've been telling you," Duncan said to him. He had told him about his unfortunate past as a warning. The last thing he wanted was for Patrick to get hurt.

Not daunted, Patrick leaned a little closer, angled his body toward Duncan even more.

"I hear what you say, but I also hear what your heart is telling me.

In case you didn't realize, your heart speaks directly to mine." Patrick looked confident but also a little sad. "But I guess with the way I act around you, I'm not surprised you don't think I can be trusted."

"It's not you."

"It's that Jason guy who's making me look bad?"

"It wasn't just him. I haven't had much luck following my heart. My boyfriend before him cheated on me with his ex. He told me about it right before he went back to him. We weren't together long, and we didn't live together, but it still hurt. The guy I dated before that demanded an open relationship, which I didn't want so I ended it. With Jason, I thought I finally had something real."

"I'm sorry."

"When it all came out, Jason told me he couldn't live like I wanted him to, that I was asking too much of him."

"By expecting him not to cheat on you? I'd call that the bare minimum," Patrick said. His disdain for Jason was obvious.

"He said I was trying to go against human nature."

"That's a bunch of bull."

"He was young."

"Yeah, old guys never cheat," Patrick said sarcastically.

"He felt confined here. While I pictured us being happy here, he said it was crazy to want to live in the middle of nowhere."

"It's not in the middle of nowhere. It's beautiful and so is being with just one person forever."

Hearing Patrick say that, Duncan smiled despite himself. That's exactly how he felt, but he was surprised that Patrick said it. Maybe he shouldn't have been.

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The big room was mostly dark. Only one lamp next to the sofa was on. The quiet, darkened room made Patrick focus on Duncan completely. His voice, low and deep, gave Patrick a sweet ache right in the center of his chest. Duncan's body, inches away, hit him a little lower. He was so close and he looked so good, but Patrick wanted to know more about Duncan's life, his heartache.

From the moment they arrived, Duncan had looked at the house with sad eyes. Now Patrick understood why. It was hard to stare at all the reminders of betrayal. Patrick saw longing in his eyes too. He could see how much Duncan still yearned for the happiness this house was supposed to contain.

Just as Patrick wanted to learn more about Duncan, Duncan wanted to know about his life. Patrick told him about his two boyfriends then he told him about how he lost his parents.

"It was a car accident. A driver fell asleep, veered into the oncoming traffic, and that was it," Patrick said simply.

"I'm so sorry."

Putting his hand over Patrick's, Duncan gave him a light, reassuring squeeze. Duncan's hand wrapped around his was strong and comforting, but his touch also made Patrick feel lightheaded. Duncan's eyes stared into Patrick's, sharing his pain.

"We lost our grandmother only a year before, but she was ill for a long time. With Mom and Dad, it was so sudden. I still have trouble believing it. But every day Mom doesn't call me to tell me how Dad is driving her crazy, it becomes a little more real."

Patrick remembered those nonsensical conversations. His mom would call, exasperated, and Patrick would smile before he even heard her out.

"What's he doing to bug you now, Mom?"

"He's humming."

"You should divorce him," Patrick told her.

"I should. He isn't humming a tune. He's just humming. I had to turn the TV on just to drown him out."

His mother might complain, but when Patrick pictured them together, he could see his mom straightening his dad's shirt collar and his tie while he smiled at her. He saw his dad kissing his mom on the cheek for no reason. If they kissed for real, Wendy would object that they were too old to kiss.

"Let them enjoy their old age," Patrick would tell her.

Their parents would stop kissing to glare at them then get back to it.

"Now they're just doing it to spite us," Wendy accused them, but both of them knew that their parents loved each other.

"I think both you and Wendy are amazing," Duncan said as he gazed at Patrick. "After Jason, I let disappointment overwhelm me. All day I wished it was night so I could just go to sleep then half the night I would lie awake wishing that it was morning so I could go to work."

"You're doing better these days, right?" Patrick asked with concern.

"Much better. You had to deal with real loss. How did you cope?" Duncan asked. His hand was on Patrick's forearm then sliding to his wrist. Duncan held his hand and looked into his eyes.

"I'm not sure," Patrick told him. "Mostly I worried about Wendy. I focused on her grief, not mine. She was in shock for so long. For days she looked at me like she just wanted me to tell her it wasn't true. My heart just got smashed to pieces seeing her grieve. But she is a strong kid. She kept me going through all of it."

Duncan put an arm around him. Patrick leaned against him and felt the weight of loss shared between them. Duncan held onto him until Patrick pulled back a little and smiled. Then Patrick took his hand again and immediately felt the intimate connection they shared despite Duncan's protests. As he stared into his eyes, Patrick wanted to thank him. He didn't know for what – for existing, for being who he was, for being there and letting him look into his eyes. Duncan pulled Patrick into a tight hug, almost crushing him. Patrick could feel his strength, and he knew that this man would never let him go, never let him down.

They pulled apart and leaned back. Silent now, they sat next to each other, feeling the air thicken, their bodies tighten. Slowly, they were shifting gears. It was time for Duncan to escape, but he didn't move. It was like they were coming to an agreement. Patrick's hand moved of its own accord. Resting on Duncan's knee, it slid up his leg. His hand gripped Duncan's thigh, letting him know that his cock was next. It was almost like a game, like Patrick was only playing with him, but the next touch was serious. The hand groping Duncan's cock through his jeans meant business. With the firm, possessive grip on his hardening cock, Patrick was telling him, not what he wanted, but what was going to happen. He still expected Duncan to try and leave, but he didn't.

As soon as Patrick decided to kiss him, Duncan turned his head. When Patrick's lips touched his softly, Duncan's mouth parted and his eyes glazed over. Sliding his tongue into Duncan's mouth, Patrick teased his tongue with his own. While they kissed, their hands grabbed for flesh, searched for exposed skin. Patrick wanted nothing to separate them – no clothes, no doubts, nothing but unbridled love. The love inside him was so strong, burning so hot, he wanted to make Duncan feel it too.

They stumbled into the office because it gave them privacy but it wasn't too close to where Wendy was sleeping. That office, which seemed transplanted from another time, glowed with moonlight. One window was open, letting in the scents of the night. The sound of night birds, the croaking of frogs, and the rustling of the leaves were

faint. Silent but breathing hard, Patrick was deafened by the beating of his own heart and the surge of blood through his veins. He and Duncan shared the same aggressive mood. As they tore each other's clothes off, they kissed and groped, exploring one another's bodies still new to them. After grappling with each other, they reached some kind of truce and sank to the floor together.

Duncan's slim, beautifully defined body was pale, like he was meant to be lit by moonlight. His eyes were gray in its wan light. His mouth was wet from Patrick's kisses. With a hungry look in his eyes, he pulled Patrick on top of him. Patrick kissed him, wanting to devour him. This was his dream. He would finally have Duncan. Consumed by his need, Patrick told himself not to rush. He had to make it last, had to make him come harder than he ever had in his life, make him forget that guy and every other guy. But Patrick's body wasn't listening to much of what he was telling it. It just wanted to be with Duncan, inside him, on top of him. Patrick's mouth wanted to be wherever there was any part of Duncan to kiss, lick, or suck.

Patrick kissed a path down his body then leaned over his cock. Large, standing proud, long and rock hard, it was more than Patrick could have dreamed. His first caress was so gentle that Duncan sobbed and cursed him. Patrick had planned to worship it as it deserved, but his own selfish need to possess it took over. He had to have it now, with no reverence, like an animal. He had to devour it. He was drunk on sex, and love, and Duncan. Then he was drunk on his come, trying desperately to swallow it all.

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Sitting in the living room, Duncan had felt his world tilt. There was no escape. With Patrick's first tentative touch, a deep need flared inside him. Uselessly, he tried to keep his body from responding. His cock had stopped taking orders from him and was already hard. In Patrick's hand, it came to life fully, hardening at the slight pressure of Patrick's strong fingers squeezing around it. Duncan was helpless to do anything but grunt. As he looked at him, Patrick's eyes turned serious, irresistible. Duncan felt powerless to keep himself from leaning in, opening his mouth for the inevitable kiss. Patrick's hair threaded between his fingers as he brought him even closer. There was no denying what was about to happen, and that meant they needed privacy.

In the office, decision made, Duncan put all his concerns out of his

mind. He had to have Patrick, but first he needed to expose every inch of his skin. Rushing, he and Patrick fought over who would strip the other first. Duncan felt Patrick's cock when he reached inside the fly he had practically ripped open. This was no time to be civilized. He couldn't wait. He had to get to it, feel it. By touch, he knew it was beautiful. Patrick's cock was thick, like warm marble in his hand, and Duncan already loved it. Seeing it fully exposed made him moan. Once Patrick was completely naked, he made Duncan shake with a base, uncontrollable desire as they pulled each other down to the floor.

As Patrick got on top, the fit of his body against Duncan's was like no other. Patrick's thicker muscles aligned with his perfectly. It was as if he had been made using Duncan as his mold, his opposite, his fated counterpart. They kissed feverishly. Patrick didn't hold back, grinding into him, holding him tighter than anyone ever had before. He wasn't afraid of his own feelings, of showing too much. His solid, young body was strong, hard, wanting him, but yielding too. Patrick was giving him pleasure, telling him how he felt with every touch. When he wrapped his mouth so tightly around Duncan's cock, Duncan had to hold back so many obscene and loving words he felt like he would choke. Wet heat enveloped him. Patrick's head bobbed up and down in the shadowy light. Stroking the whole length with his fist, Patrick swirled the head then took in the shaft until Duncan could feel the back of his throat. After several deep pulls, he finished him off fast and hard. As he came in Patrick's mouth, Duncan wanted to scream out his name. He clawed at the carpet and willed himself not to thrust too far into Patrick's mouth.

On top of him now, Patrick was kissing him, his hard cock pressing into his hip. Duncan raked his fingers over his back. Overwhelmed by Patrick's passion and his own, Duncan was sinking into an abyss of their entwined flesh. Their need for each other was the same. Duncan couldn't get enough contact with Patrick and always sought more. He wanted to wrap his body around him and touch him everywhere at once. But first he had to suck him off. With one quick move, he rolled on top of him. As he kneeled over Patrick, the hard thickness of his cock filled Duncan's mouth with plenty left for his hand. With his other hand, he fondled the balls, silky and heavy. Patrick stayed still as if he was nailed to the floor. His breaths came one on top of the other through gritted teeth. He cursed and let out a long, low moan. Gasping his name, Patrick came then quickly kissed Duncan, laying him flat again.

He was up again quickly. Patrick fumbled through his discarded clothes and then triumphantly held up condoms and lube. Lying with one arm under his head, Duncan gave him an accusing look for being

so prepared. Patrick only grinned as he kneeled between Duncan's legs. To lift himself up, Duncan placed his feet on Patrick's shoulders.

Patrick's fingertips touched him gently at first. As Patrick's eyes fell closed and he shuddered in anticipation, he probed Duncan's hole. Duncan shuddered too as Patrick's lubed fingers opened him. He whispered Patrick's name, and it felt so good on his lips. He wished he could shout it.

Patrick leaned over him to give him one hard, deep kiss before he got back into position. As Patrick pulled him close, Duncan pressed his knees to his own chest. His legs out of the way, he locked eyes with Patrick. They both grinned as Patrick took aim. The head of Patrick's cock teased his hole as Patrick's breath came out in a hiss. He wasn't teasing Duncan as much as himself. He pushed in and threw his head back. With his eyes on Patrick's exposed throat, Duncan gulped, breathless for a moment. Damn he was big. His insides protested the overload of pleasure with only minimal pain. Panting, Duncan felt Patrick's cock steadily going deeper. One of Patrick's hands was hooked around Duncan's thigh, the other around his shoulder. Patrick grunted with effort, his teeth gritted. They were both panting and sweating already. Their muscles stood out until Patrick was all the way in. Patrick rubbed Duncan's chest with one hand, his ass with the other. Gripping Duncan's hips to steady them both, Patrick pulled back. He started thrusting in smooth, powerful motions. His cock was angled just right so that Duncan shook with a constant overload of pleasure. Patrick abandoned himself to the depths that Duncan didn't think any man could reach. Duncan had never had a lover who could do this, who gave himself so completely.

Through the sex soaked fog in his brain, Duncan heard moaning, his and Patrick's, and he wondered if they were being too loud. He put one hand on the back of Patrick's neck and with the other one he grabbed his ass. He pulled Patrick down to him so they could kiss. His ass, firm and muscular, clenched under his hands on each thrust. Duncan moved his hands up the rippling muscles of Patrick's back then over his shoulders. Running his hands over Patrick's straining arms, he could feel the muscles bulge. Then every muscle of Patrick's body tensed as he came. Duncan muffled his moans with a kiss. Patrick panted his name and lowered himself to Duncan's cock. He took in as much as he could. Sucking hard, and pumping the rest in his fist, he sent Duncan out of his mind.

Having satisfied Duncan completely, Patrick lifted his head, looked at him and smiled. Duncan couldn't help but smile too. In the middle of this bad idea, he was indescribably happy.

Right there on the office floor, Patrick fell asleep leaning against his chest. The heat of his body infused Duncan as he lay there holding him. Looking at his peaceful face, mouth a little open, Duncan felt like his heart was swelling inside him, swallowing him whole until he could hardly breathe. Love was such a deadly, painful feeling, and Duncan was helpless to fight it. If the sight of his lover sleeping could do this to him, how could he get through what was coming. Duncan had thrown himself into this unwillingly, knowing it couldn't last. And just as his feelings were so much more intense than they were with any other man, so was his dread. If Patrick left him, he was sure that he would never recover.

Chapter 12

Duncan woke up Patrick right before dawn to send him to his room. First he had to fight him off as Patrick tried to recruit him for another go. Barely even awake, he was all over Duncan. By reminding himself that they might be caught by Wendy, Duncan found the willpower to shove Patrick's clothes at him and send him on his way. Groggily, Patrick stumbled in a random direction until Duncan pointed out his room.

Duncan closed the door to his own bedroom with a sigh. He smiled to himself as he thought about how eager and horny Patrick was. Turning to look at the bed in his room sobered him up. It was the bed he hadn't slept in for so long, since the days when Jason's betrayal was a fresh wound. That was when all he could see as he closed his eyes was his lover with other men and his future going up in smoke.

If the house was Duncan's heart, so long abandoned, now full again, that bed made up, untouched, was the center of his heartbreak. In that bed, Duncan had dreamed that he and Jason would be married some day, when Jason was ready, when he finally said yes. He had never asked him officially. Whenever he brought up the subject, Jason looked horrified, so Duncan knew not to ask. But he thought that as they lived the life of a happy couple, Jason would warm up to the idea. Now Duncan was glad he never said the words.

Jason was never the right man. Duncan remembered a sense of satisfaction but nothing approaching the insane ecstasy of last night. He wished it wasn't true, but Jason was the last man he had slept with. It was almost like he was faithful to the man who cheated on him even after they broke up. His heart shattered along with his trust, he just couldn't reach out to another man even just for sex.

Duncan had stayed up talking with Patrick last night knowing what might happen. He wondered if his inhibitions were weakened here, if this place loosened something inside him. It wasn't just sex he wanted from Patrick. Maybe he was desperate to drown every memory of Jason that still lingered here even if they were fading. Looking at that bed he hadn't slept in, Duncan knew it was more than that. Too big for one, that bed wasn't calling for Jason's body. Jason was just a ghost growing more transparent all the time. It was Patrick Duncan wanted next to him under those sheets, or even better, wrapped around him. It was too late now. Dawn was already breaking. It was time to get up, not go to sleep.

As he was getting ready in the pale light of early morning, Duncan

noticed that something had fallen behind the bed. He reached down and came out with Jason's baseball cap. Crumpled and a little dusty, it was the one he wore on their hikes last summer. He liked to hang it on the bedpost, and it must have fallen back there and been forgotten.

This was exactly the kind of thing Duncan dreaded finding whenever he came to the house. Duncan had only made brief, painful visits before, just to check on the place and do some quick maintenance. Whenever he visited the house, he was afraid he would come across some reminder of Jason. Now that he found something, it only unsettled him a little, like some old mistake. Jason had less power over him than Duncan expected.

Duncan was sitting on the porch steps drinking his first cup of coffee when Wendy tiptoed out of the house. She was in her dress from the day before but barefoot.

"There you are," she said. "Good morning."

"Good morning. Is Patrick up too?"

"Not yet," she said then she looked at the view of the sunrise. "That's why you're sitting out here," she realized. Her eyes took in the view greedily.

"That's why it's nice to have a porch that goes all the way around."

She agreed and sat down next to him.

"There are so many birds," she said, hearing them chirping throughout the garden.

"Did they wake you up?" Duncan asked her.

"Yes. But it's nice."

"I'll bring you some juice. You can have it out here."

"I can get it," she volunteered.

"No. I want to refill my cup anyway. You enjoy the view," he told her. "When Patrick gets up, we can have breakfast out here."

When he came back out, Wendy was smiling at the view. Then she turned to smile at Duncan as he handed her the glass of juice.

"Patrick is a late sleeper when he doesn't have to get up for work," Wendy said. She frowned. "It was better when he was at school. He could have classes later."

What she said reminded Duncan that she felt guilty about Patrick having to work full time because of her.

"You shouldn't feel bad about that," he told her.

"I can't help it. It was just too many bad things happening all together. Mom and Dad died, Patrick had to quit school, then Mitch

broke up with Patrick." She inclined her head and her long hair hid her expression from view.

"It was good that Patrick had you," Duncan told her.

"I think I made Mitch leave. I was all mopey, and I was mean to him," she said worriedly.

It was just like Patrick told him.

"You didn't make him leave, honey. Trust me. Adults have their own reasons for doing things," Duncan said.

Wendy looked up at Duncan now with a very determined expression.

"I wanted to find someone for Patrick who was even better than Mitch. Someone who was really cute, that way he wouldn't miss Mitch at all."

So that had been her plan.

"You should let Patrick decide," Duncan suggested.

"What does he know?"

"Patrick can find his own guy," Duncan assured her.

"Yes, you. He hasn't had a boyfriend since Mitch left. I think Patrick was having a hard time finding a guy because of me," she said, biting her lip.

"You're great," Duncan said.

"But I'm always in the way."

"You're not in the way. You're a great kid."

"Do you think Patrick is cute? All my friends think he's cute so I guess he must be," she said uncertainly.

"You don't know?"

"To me he just looks like Patrick."

"Your friends are right," he told her.

Hearing that, Wendy smiled and leaned her head against his arm.

"Look at the early birds," Patrick said when he came out to join them. He already had a cup of coffee in his hand.

"That's my cue to start breakfast," Duncan said, getting up.

"Me too," Wendy got up to join him.

"Why don't you stay and enjoy the view?" Duncan said.

"I enjoyed it already. I want to help," she insisted.

"Then I'm helping too," Patrick said. "I don't want to be the only lazy one."

Since Duncan never went to sleep, he had plenty of time to start breakfast. The dough for biscuits was already made. It had risen nicely and just needed to be shaped into biscuits and baked. Wendy and Patrick both helped with that. Duncan served the hot biscuits with fruit and honey. They ate at the small table on the east side of the porch.

"There's a beekeeping operation down the road. The local store sells their honey so I got some last night," Duncan told them.

"What? You can't make your own honey? I thought you could make anything," Patrick teased him.

"He made the biscuits. That's good enough," Wendy said to defend him.

Patrick laughed at her ferocity on Duncan's behalf.

After breakfast, they all went to get ready to go exploring again. That's when Duncan found himself in the hallway outside his room with Patrick. Duncan thought he would only brush up against him in passing, but just then the door to Wendy's room closed behind her. Grabbing his chance, Patrick blocked his path. At first they only stared at each other. Reaching for Duncan's face, Patrick touched him very lightly. As Patrick merely grazed his stubble with his fingertips, Duncan felt knocked over by his touch. When Patrick's fingers brushed over his lips, Duncan kissed them. Then he went for it and kissed Patrick's mouth. Patrick locked his arms around him, crushing him, growing hard against him. In their bone-melting kiss, Duncan tasted honey.

It was a brief, stolen moment that burned through him and seared his nerves. Duncan was shaking as he closed the door to his bedroom. It was too much. He couldn't stand up to this if only a kiss could devastate him. He had been filled with such a rush of possessive, all consuming desire, not just for Patrick's body but for all of him. If walls separated him from Patrick, he would tear them down. He could swear that Patrick's hands were still moving along the inside of his thigh, like they did last night, his mouth trailing paths over his skin, leaving marks of ownership. Finding himself in this state, Duncan felt like Patrick could have him any time he wanted. He had no willpower, only a bottomless need for him.

*

After not getting enough sleep, Patrick had woken up alone in a strange bed. The morning sunlight bounced a slanted version of the

window off the cream colored wall above his bed. He had to bury his face in the pillow so he could groan in loud disappointment that Duncan wasn't next to him. The only right way to wake up was in Duncan's arms, kissed by him, maybe with his hand or mouth on his cock. Such delicious thoughts only made him kick off the cover in frustration and get out of bed. Hard and wanting Duncan, Patrick knew that so late in the morning there was no chance in hell of getting him alone. His hand would have to do the job while he whispered dirty things in Duncan's name. After breakfast, he had to do it all over again, this time with the taste of Duncan's hard, honeyed kiss fresh on his tongue.

It was business as usual after that. That meant mostly hands off while they roamed the countryside. Today they went farther up the creek. The trees thickened until they were in a small forest. Then the area opened up, with bigger trees shading the water. While Wendy looked around, Patrick and Duncan sat down on a fallen log and enjoyed sitting close amid the sound of the water and the birds singing in the treetops. It was beautiful and a little mysterious there under the old trees.

Patrick allowed himself a little contact since they were already sitting side by side. It was only a friendly touch or two. Patrick wasn't trying to start anything. He just wanted to remind Duncan of what they shared since they would be leaving that day. Once they were back to their regular lives, he didn't want Duncan to be able to put it out of his mind. He knew he didn't have a firm hold on him yet, not after only one night together. But he would build on that and on everything they shared until Duncan was his.

*

Duncan wasn't sure what it would be like to spend the day in Patrick's company after their night together. That morning's kiss had given him a taste. There was a new fire burning inside him, and Patrick stoked it every chance he got. To draw his attention to a small, green turtle, Patrick ran his hand along Duncan's forearm giving him goose bumps. As they walked, Patrick's hand rested briefly on his back, and Duncan had to hold his breath and tell himself to calm down.

After they reached the older forest growing midway around the stream, the two of them sat down to watch Wendy playing in the water. Duncan felt overheated by the nearness of Patrick's body. Now that he could picture him naked in every detail, it was more difficult

than ever to keep his mind on anything else.

Peering into the roiling water of the creek, Wendy exclaimed. She reached into the water and brought out something that fit in the palm of her hand.

"Are you fishing? Did you catch our lunch?" Patrick asked as she came closer to show them.

"It's a pink heart," she said.

In her hand was a small stone that did look like a heart. It had a wide, pink stripe running through the pale gray stone.

"I'm going to keep it. Can I?" she asked Duncan.

"I don't own the creek," he told her.

"You're Duncan the Third. You must be king of something," Patrick said.

Seeing that Wendy still looked unsure, like she needed someone's permission, Duncan told her it was OK.

"Thank you," Wendy said to him as she looked at the heart. Then she smiled up at Duncan and Patrick. Duncan loved seeing a smile on her face, and then Patrick put an arm around his shoulders and made the moment complete.

As he drove them home in the evening, Duncan tried to remind himself not to get used to the happy feeling that coursed through him. It was borrowed happiness like a second hand high from being with Patrick and Wendy. Duncan found himself thinking that the whole day was like a dream, sweet and unreal but infused with sexual heat.

When they got back home, Duncan headed for his own apartment, but Wendy invited him to see her add the pink heart to her other mementos. On a bookshelf in her room, a space was devoted to such keepsakes. She showed him a four-leaf clover key chain with a broken clasp.

"That was Dad's good luck charm. One time he went to the store, and when he was in the parking lot, this old man put his foot on the gas pedal instead of the brake. Dad jumped out of the way just in time, but he dropped his keys. He found them right under the tire of that car. The key chain was broken, and it couldn't hold the keys any more so Dad gave it to me. He said it was confirmed lucky. He got a different four-leaf clover key chain, but that one didn't work."

Duncan could guess that she was referring to the accident that killed her parents. She looked sad as she touched the key chain with her fingertips. She put the heart right next to it. To make a little more

room, Wendy carefully shifted something made of aluminum foil. It kind of looked like a tiara.

"Another treasure," Duncan guessed.

Wendy looked kind of embarrassed.

"Patrick made it for me. He is a really good brother," Wendy said in a whisper, like it was a secret.

Duncan asked Patrick about it later when they sat down in the living room together after Wendy was asleep.

"Oh, that thing," Patrick said with a laugh. "It was for Halloween. We were ready to go trick-or-treating when this little girl dressed like a princess came to the door with her mother. After they left, Wendy started crying. She said, 'I forgot I could be a princess.' She was really little. She was already wearing a butterfly costume. She was crazy about butterflies, but now she was crying because she wanted to be a princess. While Mom and Dad consoled her, I went into the kitchen, got some aluminum foil and messed with it until it kind of looked like a tiara. I put it on her head and told her she was a butterfly princess. Mom added some sparkly hairpins, and she was happy."

"You are a good brother," Duncan told him.

"I do what I can," Patrick said modestly. "Actually that was the last year I went trick-or-treating. But every time she went, Wendy shared her candy with me. And I mean the mini Snickers and the Milky Ways not just the butterscotch hard candy and all that other inedible stuff people pass off as candy."

"I like to hand out little boxes of raisins. They're healthier," Duncan said.

"You monster," Patrick said then he kissed him. In one move, he threw a leg over and got on top of him. Duncan could hardly breathe. His hands wanted to be everywhere at once, touching every inch of Patrick's body. He was more desperate to have him than before they fucked. Surprisingly, Patrick slowed down the kiss and asked, "Are you tired?"

Duncan knew Patrick was giving him a way out. Not trusting himself to speak, he nodded.

They shared another quick kiss and then another at the door. In the hall, Duncan kissed him once quickly, just to say goodnight then again longer and harder because he couldn't help himself. He found it difficult to drag himself away from Patrick. As he looked at Patrick, he noticed how peaceful his face was despite his hard breathing. It was like he had no doubts about Duncan or about anything. He hoped his own expression didn't betray all the turmoil inside him.

Maybe taking pity on him, Patrick went back in, closing the door slowly. Now Duncan was on fire for him, but he was gone. Full of yearning, Duncan closed his eyes on that door separating him from Patrick. Of course it wasn't the door, it was Duncan keeping them apart. If it wasn't for him, they could be sleeping together all night long, and not just tonight, every night. But for how long?

As Duncan walked into his apartment, he was afraid that one night he would find himself in bed alone, chilled to the bone like when Jason left. He remembered the sound of the wind outside his empty house. The whistle of the wind was overlaid with Jason's words "This is your house, not mine, your dream, not mine." There was no lonelier feeling than being abandoned. His dream house suddenly seemed oppressive, its walls heavy and cold. How could anyone be happy here?

Of course it didn't seem that way when Patrick and Wendy were there. It was a home again. Duncan was back to dreaming and planning a perfect future like he was no wiser after what happened with Jason. Not that Patrick would ever cheat. He didn't have a dishonest bone in his body. When he got tired of Duncan, Patrick would move on the right way, after making a clean break. Duncan was sure of that. Still, having his heart broken by an honest man wasn't anything to look forward to.

Chapter 13

Duncan didn't so much sleep as doze a few times as he spent all night obsessing over Patrick. He relived every moment he spent with Patrick, imagined him in his bed and kissed him all over. And the whole time he told himself it wouldn't work.

By the time he went to the store, Duncan was exhausted. Of course Arthur grinned at him knowingly. A man can't show up for work tired without being accused of having a sex life. At least he wasn't getting those looks of sympathy any more.

That evening, Duncan went to visit Stacy. He was really trying to avoid Patrick. It was cowardly, but he couldn't face him yet for more than a few minutes. He hoped talking to Stacy might help center him.

Since Stacy was working late, he went to her office. Stacy's office was beautifully decorated, of course, but most of the time it was used as a storage room. Duncan had to make his way through accent pieces and throw rugs, throw pillows and bolts of fabric. He felt like he needed a machete. When he went to sit across from her desk, Stacy told him, "Not that chair. It's for this townhouse I'm doing."

Getting up from her desk, she showed him to a little nook where she usually met with clients. After she told him what she had been up to personally and professionally, Duncan told her that he invited Patrick and Wendy to the house this past weekend.

"I did it on an impulse. Then on another impulse, I asked them to stay the night," Duncan confessed.

"Risky," she said with a raised eyebrow. She didn't really disapprove though. "I thought you decided that from now on you would let your brain take the lead."

"My brain takes a vacation as soon as I set eyes on Patrick."

"So you're finally lusting after someone. Quite a ride isn't it?" Stacy said with a smile.

"It is," Duncan had to agree. He wondered if she meant that he hadn't lusted after anyone since Jason, or even before. She was kind of right. Jason might have broken his heart, but he never quite had a hold on it in the same way Patrick did. "I'm just afraid it ends in a fiery crash."

"Ride while you can," Stacy advised him. "Love won't always come knocking."

"Are you about to tell me I'm not getting any younger?" Duncan practically dared her to say it.

"I guess I don't have to," she said brazenly and added a shrug. "But it's not just that. You don't fall in love easily. How long will you have to wait until you feel this way again?"

Duncan knew it was true. He couldn't remember having these kinds of feelings since he was a hormone fueled teenager. Adolescent feelings in a man his age – that wasn't a pretty picture.

"I'm not going to get involved with him." Duncan said it for his own sake. He wanted to convince himself that he had made a decision he could stick with. He didn't really believe it and neither did Stacy.

"Really?" Stacy said and cocked her head to one side. "If I hadn't seen what he looks like, I might believe you. If I hadn't seen how he looks at you and how you look at him, I might believe you. But I saw all that, and you are doomed."

"We are just spending time together."

"Playing house with him? You would be better off just fucking him." Seeing the look on his face, she knew the truth. "You're doing both? You're hopeless. Just go buy the damn engagement rings already."

"I'm not that far gone," Duncan said, trying to defend himself.

"You know I'm not a big fan of the whole cozy, domestic scene, but if that's what you want..." she started to say.

"Things between Patrick and me are still friendly and casual. I'd like to keep it that way."

"You? You're ready to hand over you poor, broken heart to him like a kid with a broken toy saying 'fix it.'"

Duncan was appalled at this infantile image of him.

"Sorry," Stacy said. "But that's you. That's why the first time I met Jason, I wanted to dropkick him to the curb and tell him never to go near you again."

"I admire how you restrained yourself," Duncan told her, but she probably regretted not telling him what she really thought of Jason at the time. Not that it would have done much good. Maybe that's why she wasn't holding back when it came to Patrick. Except this time, he was counting on her to discourage him, and she was telling him to go for it. Patrick was too young and too soon after Jason. Duncan wasn't ready for him. If he hadn't introduced her to Patrick, Stacy would be telling him to be careful and take it slow. Now she was too busy picturing Patrick naked.

Duncan didn't manage to avoid Patrick for long. The next evening, Patrick came to him.

"Save me," Patrick said as soon as Duncan opened the door.

"From?"

"It's Wendy's turn to host her little study group. I have a houseful of little nerd girls. They keep looking at me, whispering and giggling." Patrick stared back at his own apartment door with an aggrieved look.

"It's when they stop doing that that you have to worry," Duncan informed him. "I bet I could walk in there without a single whisper or a giggle."

"I dare you to," Patrick said then he marched him across the hall.

"Duncan the Third!" Wendy said excitedly as he came in. Then she turned to her friends. "Everyone, this is him, Duncan the Third. He's my boss at The Copper Kettle."

Duncan said a quiet "Hi" and all the girls said "Hi" really loud.

All six girls were sitting on the floor in the living room with books, notebooks, phones, tablets, and a few laptops scattered around them.

"If you don't want him for Patrick, he could be my dad's boyfriend," one of the girls said as she looked up at Duncan.

"No! I told you I changed my mind," Wendy said.

"Is your dad gay?" Patrick asked the girl.

"No," she said like that fact had no bearing on her offer.

Patrick and Duncan retreated into the kitchen. Breathing a sigh of relief, Patrick dropped into a chair at the breakfast table while Duncan remained standing.

"They were a nightmare," Duncan mocked him. "We barely got out of there alive."

Patrick looked at him indignantly, then he brightened and said, "As far as that girl's dad is concerned, you would turn him gay like that." Patrick snapped his fingers. Seeing Duncan's wry look, he added. "Don't act modest. You are all kinds of hot. I should know." Patrick eyes roamed Duncan's body, making him feel naked.

"Should we make them snacks?" Duncan asked to change the subject.

"If we feed them, they'll never leave," Patrick said then he answered more seriously. "Wendy took care of that. She made her special M&M and pretzel mix. You don't need to work, just keep me company." He pointed at the other chair, which Duncan hadn't taken yet.

"I like to keep busy," Duncan said as he sat down across from him, feeling a little uneasy at being alone with Patrick with nothing to do.

"You mean keep yourself out of my reach," Patrick said with an understanding smile.

As Patrick leaned forward with his elbows on the table, Duncan made a point of leaning back. Noticing a more serious look cross Patrick's face, Duncan leaned toward him again. He did it unconsciously. Whenever he sensed that Patrick was withdrawing from him, he reached out to pull him back. All the time he was pushing him away, the worst thing Duncan could think of was losing him. Now he wanted to know what was on his mind. With a look, he encouraged Patrick to speak up.

"Sometimes I think I'm trying too hard to grab hold of you. Other times I think if I don't, you'll slip away. You always look so ready to run," Patrick said.

"I do? I never thought of myself that way," Duncan said and looked down. He wasn't a guy who ran, and he wanted to assert that point. "You shouldn't think of me that way either. Whatever happens, I'll stick around. You can count on me."

"Don't say as a friend," Patrick warned him.

Duncan only smiled. That's when Wendy poked her head into the kitchen.

"We're going to watch *Glee*. Do you want to watch it with us?" she asked them.

"I thought you were supposed to be studying," Patrick said.

"We're taking a break. And *Glee* is the best show of all the shows ever," she said and she looked ready to fight anyone who disagreed.

Duncan raised his hands in surrender.

"What if we make you some popcorn?" Duncan asked, he had noticed the popcorn maker in one of the cabinets.

"Yes! We'll wait for it," she said and ran back to her friends.

Patrick shook his head as Duncan got up.

"You're helping," Duncan told him.

Patrick made a big show of sighing and dragging his feet. When he finally reached Duncan, he stood too close to him, almost shoving him. The warmth and hardness of his body felt good, but Duncan couldn't give into those feelings.

"It's not like I'm groping you," Patrick said to defend himself when Duncan gave him a warning look.

"Behave yourself," Duncan told him, but he couldn't help smiling.

When the popcorn maker started up, Patrick covered Duncan's ears. It was loud. Hearing it, Duncan decided to get them a better one. He put his own hands over Patrick's and looked at him. How could anyone be so beautiful and so open? Bringing Patrick's hand to his mouth, Duncan kissed the palm of his hand. Before he was tempted to

do more, he turned his attention back to the popcorn. Patrick put an arm around him and kissed his shoulder. Duncan could almost hear him saying, "It could always be like this. This could be your life from now on." Being with Patrick like this in a meaningless moment that meant everything, it was easy to imagine their life together. Patrick would always be within reach, always ready to return his touch and show his love. Duncan could feel his heart beating hard at the thought. Just then, he didn't dare look at Patrick because he was ready to say yes to anything he asked.

Next morning, Duncan awoke alone in bed, missing Patrick next to him even though he had never been there. Duncan had dreamed him so vividly that he felt a terrible ache at not finding him there warm and close, ready to kiss him good morning.

His extreme longing was only the counterweight to the pain ahead of him. When he and Patrick fucked, Duncan had felt so insanely happy, and now he was scared. It was like he found himself suddenly soaring through the air only to remember he couldn't fly. He was now past the point of no return with Patrick. Looking back, calling this a mistake, telling himself to stop were all useless. He was calling back a man who had already jumped.

In his heart, he had already committed himself to a relationship that was never going to last. And what would happen when Patrick got tired of him and left him. Just the thought of it made it hard for him to breathe. The real pain would be so much worse. And now it was too late to protect himself. Since Jason left him, the pain in his heart had been fading from those first days of blind anger followed by blank despair. Patrick made it almost disappear. But if he suffered like that over losing Jason, he couldn't imagine what losing Patrick would do to him. Even as he told himself this, every memory of Patrick was so sweet to him. He could never let him go.

"Since when do you work late?" Patrick asked when he saw Duncan coming in around eight.

Patrick was taking out the garbage, but stopped to talk to him next to the elevators.

"We get busy sometimes," Duncan said vaguely. He knew Patrick would see right through any excuse anyway.

"You don't need to feel like you're under siege just because we live so close," Patrick said kindly. "Now that we're on the right track, we can take it slow."

"What track is that?" Duncan asked. He felt fear grip him.

Hearing the coldness and the rejection in his voice, Patrick got very serious.

"I thought we were getting somewhere," he said, his voice hoarse. He looked both angry and sad.

"Because we slept together?" Duncan said. He wasn't sure if he could deny what their night together meant to him, but he was going to try even as Patrick gave him that hurt look.

"Are you going to tell me we had a one night stand? Just a little casual fuck?" Patrick was already angry, even without hearing Duncan say those words.

"No," Duncan said, kicking himself. Why was it so hard to lie to him?

"Do you even know what you're saying?" Patrick asked, exasperated with him.

"I can't have a relationship with you," Duncan stated, wanting to make it plain.

"Because of him," Patrick said bitterly.

"Because of you."

"And how is that?" Patrick asked, getting even angrier.

Duncan knew he was wrong to do it this way, after they slept together. He had been weak and now they were both paying for it.

"You are not the right man for me. I need a relationship that will last, and you're just too young," Duncan said. That at least was the truth.

"This is about our age difference?" Patrick asked. He obviously didn't think it mattered.

"It's almost the same age difference as between you and Wendy," Duncan pointed out.

"Are you seriously comparing me to a nine-year -old?" Patrick asked.

Duncan confirmed it.

"In some ways. She's looking for a father figure. Aren't you?"

"Fuck you," Patrick said, glaring at him. "Age is a number. It's not who I am."

"I know that."

"Prove it!"

Duncan tried to speak, but Patrick didn't let him. He continued, "Or am I the one who's supposed to prove himself? I'm not him, but how am I supposed to show you if you won't let me?"

While Patrick was furious, Duncan remained calm, at least

outwardly.

"I can't take getting my heart broken again."

"No problem, because I won't do that. But you know what? Right now, you're breaking mine," Patrick told him. Duncan could see tears in his eyes along with anger.

"I'm sorry," Duncan said. "I think I understand where you are coming from. You are looking for stability in your life right now because you have Wendy to think of. And that's admirable. Someone like me, who wants a family, seems like a perfect fit. But what about when Wendy goes off to college? I won't be a perfect fit any more, and you'll be looking for what you missed out on."

"Is that what you crystal ball tells you?" Patrick asked, getting mad again and pushing away his sadness. "You know where you can stick your crystal ball. Except your head is already up your ass so I don't know if there is any room." Patrick walked away.

Duncan stood there, not sure what he felt. Had he done it, pushed him away? His heart was beating in his ears, loud but slow. Throughout their conversation he stayed calm, now he felt like he was choking. He looked around blindly. He wanted to drive Patrick away, but now he was shaking with fear that he might have succeeded.

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Patrick came this close to slamming his apartment door, but he caught it just in time. Wendy still looked up at him curiously. She was sitting on the couch with her laptop on her knees. Patrick smiled at her. He didn't want her to worry.

There was nothing to worry about anyway. He knew Duncan was deliberately picking a fight, trying to make him mad and push him away. That didn't keep him from getting mad anyway. Cursing and storming away from Duncan during an argument probably wasn't the best way to prove his maturity. But at the moment, Patrick wasn't in the mood to prove himself to a guy who had no faith in him. That didn't mean he would let Duncan push him away. He would get mad, curse, and stick around anyway. Then Duncan would have to deal with a pissed off Patrick. That would show him.

That night, Patrick lay awake thinking about the blond hair on Duncan's arms and legs. He couldn't live without feeling it brush his skin again. Half asleep, wallowing in memories of Duncan, Patrick felt like he had dreamed him. Duncan wasn't like anyone else he had ever met. He was unreal and he was the real thing. It scared the hell out of

Patrick that he might lose him. To him, the days before Duncan seemed like a lifetime ago. He had looked into those kind blue-gray eyes and they set his heart on fire. The way Duncan kissed him and touched him, that sad, yearning in his eyes, the lean, hardness of his body, the deep softness of his voice – Patrick had to have all of it. He was greedy for him in every way, like an animal, like a lover, like a worshiper. He wanted to devour him and treasure him.

Patrick felt his love for Duncan as a solid, unchanging thing. If he could only make Duncan feel it too. It made him crazy that Duncan didn't know they were meant for each other. How could Duncan think there could ever be anyone else for Patrick except him? Once he got him, Patrick was never letting him go. He remembered falling asleep in Duncan's arms, and he knew he would be doing that again because that's where he belonged. Even if he couldn't explain why, Patrick was sure of Duncan. Somewhere along the way Duncan had made him a promise. Maybe it was in Duncan's expressive blue-gray eyes, which told Patrick everything. Those eyes were telling him, you'll have Duncan in your arms again.

Chapter 14

Duncan picked up Wendy from school as usual and then Patrick picked her up from The Copper Kettle. He didn't come into the store though. He waited for her outside.

"Patrick is in a bad mood," Wendy told Duncan as she left.

Duncan stared out the window even after they were both long gone. He was hopeless. Patrick was staying away from him just like he wanted, and Duncan was ready to chase after him and smother him with kisses. Duncan knew that if he didn't live so close, he would find excuses that would put him in Patrick's neighborhood, on his street, on his doorstep.

When Melissa arrived for her shift, she casually glanced at the reorders Duncan had put in for some of their more popular items. Within seconds she had found a mistake. Duncan looked over the other orders he had filled out. There was more than one mistake.

"I'll fix them and email the corrections," Duncan said.

"This is a new side of you. I guess you're having trouble concentrating with Patrick on your mind," she said with a grin.

Duncan hung his head and sighed. He was transparent to everyone. When he looked up, he saw Melissa still smiling at him.

"You must be really crazy about him," she said.

"I wouldn't say that."

"You might not want to say it, but the fact is, you weren't like this with Jason," Melissa told him.

"I wasn't incompetent?" Duncan said.

"No," Melissa said simply. "You seemed happy enough, and you were so dedicated to making things work with him," she said. She knew it because she owed her promotion to assistant manager to Duncan wanting more free time to spend with Jason. "It's nice to see this side of you."

"The bumbling idiot who can't get a simple reorder right?" Duncan said.

"You were like a zombie this past winter. You're finally coming back to life. You're human again, and humans make mistakes." She shrugged and walked away.

Consumed by thoughts of Patrick, it was no wonder he was screwing up. He didn't expect to be praised for it. As he was getting ready to leave, he was already thinking about what Patrick would be doing tonight, what they could have been doing together if the future

didn't look so bleak to him. His feelings for Patrick had taken over his heart completely, and there was nothing he could do about it except limit the damage and miss Patrick.

That evening, Duncan heard a light knock and found Wendy on his doorstep.

"You're not busy, are you?" she asked.

"No," Duncan said. He should have said he was so he'd have an excuse to send her away, but he just couldn't.

"Then let's go out," she said earnestly. "Patrick is upset. I want us to cheer him up."

Duncan didn't know how to tell her that he was the reason. More than that, he hated that Patrick was upset because of him. He couldn't stand the thought that he was protecting himself at Patrick's expense. When he thought of that, every excuse, every refusal died on his lips. The fact was Duncan couldn't say no to either of Wendy or Patrick. She waited for him, happy that he agreed. Duncan got ready quickly and followed Wendy to her apartment.

"Duncan the Third is here," she announced him. "We're going out. I'm going to go get ready. You get ready too, Patrick." She ran off to her bedroom, leaving them alone.

Patrick looked startled to see him as he straightened up from a slouching position on the couch.

"What are you doing here?" he asked Duncan.

Duncan didn't see the usual welcome on his face, and it made his chest constrict.

"I heard some jerk upset you," Duncan said. He noticed that his voice was weak, almost a whisper.

"You heard right," Patrick confirmed, and finally a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

Duncan felt like he might burst into tears seeing Patrick look at him more like he used to.

"I'm going to cheer you up even if it kills me," Duncan vowed.

"It just might. I'm pretty pissed," Patrick warned him, but he was still smiling.

Duncan didn't know if he wanted to laugh or cry. He was so happy to be with Patrick again.

They ended up going to the Mega Games Arcade. Duncan had passed the place without giving it a second look. It was filled with lights, noise, kids, and teens. There were a few parents around too,

but they were a silent minority. Wendy was right at home there, but Patrick had only insisted on going there to torture Duncan. Not that Patrick didn't make himself at home at the console of a zombie killing game.

"Your penance is to watch me kick some zombie ass," Patrick said right into his ear to be heard over the noise.

When Wendy tried to drag Duncan away to play a more physical game, Patrick didn't let her.

"No, honey, let him rest his old bones right here," Patrick told her.

Duncan suffered dutifully, until Patrick took pity on him and they went to dinner. The whole time he eyed Duncan with a question in his eyes, "Now what?"

He got a chance to get his answer after they went home and Wendy went to bed. Duncan had been on pins and needles waiting to be alone with Patrick. When he found himself standing across from him in the kitchen, he felt like his heart would burst.

"I'm sorry about the way I acted," Duncan said before Patrick had a chance to speak.

Without saying anything, Patrick eyed him for a minute. It was as if something in Duncan's eyes mattered more to him than what he said.

"You can't help being a bitter old man," Patrick said with a shrug.

"I promise not to be that guy. Now stop calling me old," Duncan said.

"You keep hyping our age difference. I assume you want me to think of you that way."

Duncan got his point loud and clear.

"OK. I deserve that. I never meant to diminish your feelings. I won't do that again," Duncan assured him.

"I'm don't like to do a lot of yapping about my feelings anyway. I'm just going to seduce the hell out of you," Patrick told him with a smirk.

"You might be underestimating my self-control," Duncan said though there was no proof of that. As far as Patrick was concerned, he didn't have any.

"You can't resist me. Stop pretending you can. And don't you dare try to tell me that our night together didn't mean anything."

"I wouldn't do that, but..." Duncan said. He didn't want to admit how deep his feelings were either.

Patrick stopped him with a raised hand.

"OK, I'll make you a deal. I won't jump ahead to booking us a wedding venue if you don't try and take that night away from me," Patrick said.

"I told you, I wouldn't do that. That night meant something to both of us, but I'll take the part of the deal where you don't jump ahead."

"Sex was my way of convincing you that we are a perfect fit."

"You may be able to seduce me any time you want, but you can't seduce me into a relationship," Duncan told him.

"Yeah, right. You're going to give up heavenly sex with me for what?" Patrick said.

Duncan was dumbstruck for a moment.

"Did you just call it heavenly?" He had to laugh.

"Fucking you is like having sex with an angel." Seeing that Duncan still laughed, Patrick asked him, "What? How would you describe it?"

"Like having sex with a devil."

"Hey. Be nice."

"I mean that in the best possible way," Duncan told him.

"OK," Patrick agreed. "I'll be your devil. You be my angel."

"With the way I behaved, I'm no angel. I got carried away, and now I'm asking you not to get carried away," Duncan said.

"I'm asking for a lot too," Patrick said, then he made a list of his demands. "Don't stereotype me. Don't label me. Don't dismiss me."

"I know I'm being unfair to you."

"To both of us. Get it together, Duncan. I shouldn't have to pay for what some other guy did to you."

"How are you paying?" Duncan asked.

"Are you kidding? You don't think it hurts when you push me away. I feel alone, like there's no hope for..."

"I don't mean to hurt you. I never want to do that." Seeing the pain in his eyes, Duncan wanted to hug him so badly.

"I worry that you'll never trust me with your heart," Patrick said. "You let your heart decide before, and now you don't trust it."

"I'm not even sure it was my heart," Duncan confessed. "I wanted to find a guy, settle down, and have everything fall into place. I just wanted to have someone and to be happy, and I rushed things. After that, I lost trust in myself, in my judgment, in my ability to keep a man interested."

"You're driving me right out of my mind. Does that count as interested?" Patrick said.

"Maybe you just like the chase, and as soon as I give in, you'll lose interest." He didn't really think that was true. It was just another of his nagging fears.

"Maybe you like the chase," Patrick accused him right back. "I know you picked a fight as a way of putting some distance between us. Just so you know, the only thing you did was make me mad. That's not enough to make me give up on you. Piss me off as much as you want, and I'll still be right here as soon as you're ready to start living again," Patrick said. Then he stared at Duncan for a little bit and switched to a milder tone. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to minimize what you went through with Jason."

"And I don't intend to live my life according to all my bad experiences."

"Good to hear," Patrick said, smiling. "You need love in your life. Even if it's not with me, you should still..."

"Not with you?" Duncan said, interrupting him. What was the point of being with anyone but Patrick? In fact, he knew that if he let him go, he would regret it and never find anyone who could compare to him. Every man would just be a pale shadow of the man he really wanted. And if he couldn't take a chance on Patrick, would he ever take a chance on anyone? Who could be worth the risk if Patrick wasn't? No one. Patrick was the only man for him.

"And if it doesn't happen?" Duncan asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

"I'm not worried. You're not going to be my Jason."

"Your what?"

"I'm betting everything on you, and I know you won't fail me. That doesn't mean I want to lose your friendship. It's great having you as a friend. And if I have to, I'll settle for that. But not any time soon."

Duncan liked hearing that. The truth was he was hoping for more too, but it was good to know that Patrick valued his friendship. They smiled at each other for a minute then Patrick said, "OK. Glad that's settled. Now I need the biggest, best hug you've got."

"You're so demanding," Duncan joked as he took him in his arms and probably squeezed him too hard. God, he felt good, so strong, solid and loving. It was strange to hold a dream in his arms.

"You feel so good. It's not fair," Patrick said as he kept hugging him like he would never let go.

"Goes both ways," Duncan whispered into his ear. It was all he could say. He felt so shaky with too many emotions.

"I need this," Patrick said softly as they held each other. "I always

need this."

Duncan didn't let him go for a long time. He was just happy to be able to hold him and give him something he needed. He enjoyed his scent and the feel of his strong body melding into his.

Chapter 15

After parking in front of the building, Patrick walked to pick up Wendy from The Copper Kettle. He looked forward to seeing Duncan, maybe dragging him home with them for dinner. Since his talk with Duncan, Patrick felt lighter, even more sure that the two of them had a future. He was still kind of mad at him for pulling that crap, but mainly he was happy. Even if they didn't take the big step forward he wanted, they were making progress. He just had to remind himself to be patient with poor, old Duncan. He smirked as he thought about teasing him about his age, but he decided to save it for when Duncan was more securely in his clutches.

As he was nearing The Kettle, Patrick saw Duncan's friend Stacy stepping out. She looked around and spotted him. When she turned decisively on her very high heels to walk in his direction, Patrick felt like a laser rifle was trained on him.

"Don't shoot," he said to her since the expression on her face was kind of scary.

"What have you done to my Duncan?" she asked him while shaking her head.

Instead of answering, Patrick focused on her claim of ownership.

"Your Duncan? I'll fight you for him," he told her.

"I bet you would. I don't mind a challenge, but where Duncan is concerned, you might want a less aggressive approach. Sneak up on him like he's an easily startled animal," she started to suggest, but Patrick didn't need to hear it again.

"I know. My friend Cory already warned me, except he used a fencing analogy," Patrick told her.

"I'm more of a huntress so I understand the stalk your prey mentality."

Patrick sighed, not liking the sound of that.

"I guess I'm a man out of control where Duncan is concerned. I didn't even know a guy could drive me this crazy, but I've been behaving myself recently," Patrick said helplessly.

She looked him up and down like she liked the sound of that.

"For what it's worth, I'm rooting for you," she said.

"Thanks," Patrick said. He wasn't expecting her endorsement. He was pretty sure she was scolding him. "Don't you think we're a bad match?" he asked her.

"You can't put people together like you're decorating a house.

People belong together because their hearts belong together. If you feel the same way then you're a good match."

That sounded kind of romantic. Patrick decided not to point it out to her. He did point out something else.

"Isn't it your job as Duncan's best friend to protect him? I could be after his money or something."

She dismissed that with a wave of her beautifully manicured hand.

"Hey, I could be a dangerous character. Maybe a conman. For all you know, I might be taking advantage of him," Patrick claimed.

"Sexually? I would hope so."

"We aren't in great financial situation," Patrick told her. That was true.

Stacy laughed at the idea of Patrick being after Duncan's money.

"Duncan is such a wonderful, giving man," she said with a fond look in her eyes. "He gave so much of himself to Jason, and he didn't deserve one bit of it. But I can see how much you give back to him, and your little sister too. Go ahead, rob him blind. Just remember, be stealthy. Think like a cat burglar not a mugger." She smiled at him encouragingly and left.

Patrick was amazed at her long stride in those high heels and also at what she said.

A little later, Patrick took Wendy home. Then after she got ready, he took her over to her friend's house. As soon as he got back, Patrick was knocking on Duncan's door.

"Wendy is at a sleepover. Come on over, unless you want me in there," Patrick said pointing into Duncan's apartment.

"I'll just read a book," Duncan said with a teasing look in his eyes.

"And leave me home alone, pining for you?"

"There are other guys out there," Duncan pointed out.

"I don't see any other guys," Patrick said, staring right at him.

"Try going out and looking around," Duncan suggested, bluffing, like he could handle seeing Patrick dating anyone else.

"I can't. I'm blinded by you," Patrick told him. "Looking at you is like having the sun in my eyes. I can't see anything but you."

"Wendy isn't going to have a sleepover every night. Don't waste a chance to go and have fun," Duncan said.

"Right back at you," Patrick told him, but Duncan wasn't budging. Patrick tried a different approach. "If I go back to my place to be miserable, will that prove that I'm serious about you? Maybe when

you see me waiting for you forever, you'll finally believe that I have staying power?" Patrick was guilting the hell out of him, but Duncan was asking for it.

"I don't want to make you wait for me," Duncan told him.

"Even better. I hate waiting."

"I mean you should be going out."

"Going out is a great idea. Let's go," he said and grabbed Duncan by the arm.

"Are you kidnapping me?" Duncan asked.

"I'm wooing you. We could go and have dinner. Public place so I can't jump you."

"Also known as a date," Duncan said. Patrick was now ready to get exasperated at yet another objection, but Duncan finally gave up. "Fine. Let's go."

"Yes!" Patrick said, finally happy.

As he went to get ready, Patrick tried to think. What was it Stacy told him to do? Push hard, don't let up, chase that man down until he's yours. That must be it. Good advice.

Actually, Patrick did take Stacy's advice to heart. He wanted Duncan to enjoy their time together and not have to be on his guard. During dinner, he kept things casual and Duncan seemed at ease. Patrick loved how comfortable he felt with him but always with a sexual charge stirring the air, making it crackle with filthy possibilities. Every look held a promise. If only they were alone, neither one of them would be wearing one stitch of clothing.

After dinner, they walked home. Their arms brushed sometimes, but Patrick kept his hands to himself. That was agony.

Store windows and streetlights lit the way, but as he noticed the darkened windows above, Patrick remembered the night before. He told Duncan about a nightmare Wendy had.

Last night he had opened his eyes to see Wendy standing by his bed.

"Hey," he said to her groggily, wondering what was wrong.

"Sorry," she whispered. "You can go back to sleep. I was just checking."

"Checking what?"

"That you're still big. It's OK now," she said, still whispering.

"Umm. What?" Patrick wondered if that would make sense if he was fully awake.

"I had a dream that you turned into a little kid, and I had to take

care of you," Wendy told him.

"Oh. I'm still big so there's nothing to worry about," Patrick assured her with a smile.

Wendy smiled sheepishly and nodded. After she said goodnight, she went back to her own room. Then it was Patrick who couldn't go back to sleep. He got up for a glass of water, and decided to check on Wendy a little later to make sure she went back to sleep all right.

As he told Duncan what happened, at first he didn't see why it was a big deal.

"I'm worried that Wendy doesn't feel secure with me," Patrick explained.

"It's a big change."

Patrick agreed.

"From stupid big brother to almost parent."

"I think you're doing great. And Wendy seems pretty confident and secure. Just don't turn into a little kid, and everything will be fine," Duncan told him.

Further on, there weren't as many lit up stores, and they walked around in the dark, feeling close and connected, alone together. To stay off the subject that preoccupied both of them, Patrick kept talking about Wendy. Duncan never seemed to tire of hearing about her. It was so obvious that he was dying to have a kid of his own.

"It's their final study session this time with a sleepover," Patrick said. "Wendy is very serious about school. After our parents died, I had a little talk with a counselor at her school. She warned me that Wendy's grades might suffer and that it was normal. But Wendy has been studying even harder since we lost Mom and Dad. I think she wants to make them proud. When she got her first report card, Dad asked her if he could take it to work with him and show it to everyone. She said, 'Like show and tell.' She was so pleased so Dad took every one her report cards to show them off. I'm not sure if he actually did, but it made Wendy happy that he was so proud of her." Patrick got a little choked up and teary eyed. "I shouldn't start talking about Mom and Dad, or I get all..."

"You should talk about them," Duncan told him and rubbed his back lightly. "They gave you those memories so you could keep them and share them."

"I wish I could remember them without the pain. Relive a sweet moment and not want to cry," Patrick said.

"The more you lose, the more it hurts." Duncan looked into his eyes and then held him.

Patrick stepped back and smiled at him. Damn, he was wonderful.

"I like to think of Mom and Dad still being together," Patrick said to him to show him he could cope. "I try to remember how they were with each other. One time I was helping Dad wash the car, and he got hot and took his shirt off. And I am like. 'Hey! Put the shirt back on!' Then I see Mom gazing at him with melting eyes, and she says, 'Your father is a beautiful man.' Dad actually blushed. And I pretended to be scandalized and told him, 'That shirt goes back on right now.'" The memory put a smile on Patrick's face. He still felt a tightening in his chest, but his smile didn't go away.

"You had a lot of fun with your parents," Duncan said.

"Had fun with them, made fun of them," Patrick said lightly. "What about your parents?"

"Cold fish." That's all Duncan said.

"No funny stories?" Patrick prompted him.

Duncan thought about it.

"One time my dad went over to a colleague's house and mistook his wife for the maid because she was Hispanic."

"Damn! That's not so much funny as horrible," Patrick said.

"He came home furious, asking why someone didn't 'warn' him. Mother told him that was his secretary's job. So he called up his secretary at home to yell at her."

"OK. You can stop telling me stories about your parents," Patrick told him.

"It won't surprise you that we're estranged," Duncan said.

"You would pretty much have to be." Patrick couldn't believe that a great guy like Duncan could have such awful people as his parents.

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Duncan laughed at Patrick's reaction to hearing about his parents. Duncan had never been close to them, but he knew it would still hurt to lose them. Patrick had lost a close and loving family. Even if he hadn't heard Patrick and Wendy speak so fondly of their parents, he would have known they came from a happy home. He could see it in them. Everything about them said, "We were happy and loved." He was sure they would be again. Thinking about his own parents, their cold marriage, Duncan wondered if he had been fooled by Jason because he didn't know what happiness and real love looked like.

Duncan's parents were well-off, living comfortably, and locked in a loveless marriage, while Patrick's parents were in debt and in love till

the end. Maybe Patrick learned the secret of a happy life from them and maybe he could teach Duncan.

Suddenly, Patrick let out the breath he was holding.

"What was that?" Duncan asked seeing relief on his face and not knowing the reason.

"You had such a serious look on your face. You scared me. I thought you were going to tell me to back off," Patrick said.

They were lingering near the entrance to their building, not ready to go up. Maybe that's why Patrick expected some kind of warning.

"What would be the point? Neither one of us listens to what I say," Duncan grumbled.

"You don't either?"

"My brain is always telling me you are a bad idea, but the rest of me doesn't listen."

"Thank the rest of you for me," Patrick told him.

Patrick had unbelievable power over his body, and he had even more power over his heart. Duncan could feel it now as he willed himself to say no to any invitation Patrick might make and go to his apartment alone.

"Relax. Don't struggle so hard. You're already part of my life," Patrick told him.

"But we aren't a couple."

"That's what I'm trying to fix. My plan is to wait you out, let things develop, prove to you I'm no flake. But I just don't have that kind of patience. I want to get my hands on the goods."

Duncan wanted that too, but he was trying to be strong, trying to prove to himself that he was capable of making the right decision not just following his dick.

"I have to take it slow," he said to Patrick. "I rushed in, and I didn't see what was going on with Jason. I need time to make myself believe this is real."

"Nothing is going on with me. I'm an open book. You don't need to protect yourself from me. I'm a good guy."

"I know you are. You're even too good. I don't know why either you or Wendy bother with me the way I am." Duncan scoffed at himself.

"Wendy turns to you for a good reason. My reasons are a little different," Patrick said with a smile. "But we both see something in you."

"Maybe it's something that used to be there but isn't any more."

"We can help you heal. But, Duncan, that goes both ways. You can

help us heal too," Patrick told him.

Duncan felt his breath catch in his throat. He was reminded of how much Patrick must be suffering and how seldom he let it show.

"We need you," Patrick said simply.

Duncan hugged him. He didn't care if it sent the wrong message or the right one. He just had to hold him. He hugged him as tightly as he dared, just short of hurting him.

"I need all of you," Patrick whispered.

Duncan knew what he meant. As Patrick stepped back, he gave him such a longing look that Duncan could see all the love Patrick had inside him. If only Duncan could believe that it was meant only for him. But Duncan just couldn't stand to see him hurting, so he opened his arms to Patrick, leaving his heart exposed.

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All next day, Patrick had to tell himself that it wasn't a date, but it sure felt like a date to him. Last night Patrick had allowed himself a few casual touches. Duncan wasn't good at hiding how they affected him. He loved how Duncan's body responded to his touch. Duncan was always so close to giving in, but Patrick didn't just want to seduce him. He wanted Duncan fully. Patrick wanted their connection to be more than physical. To have Duncan in his arms, to be able to kiss him for as long as he wanted, not just until he ran away, that was worth waiting for.

When he went to pick up Wendy from the store, he made sure to keep it casual, not to act like a lovesick idiot. Duncan had that cautious look in his eyes at first, but he smiled seeing how well Patrick behaved.

"Thanks again for last night," Patrick told him as he and Wendy left.

"What did you mean?" Wendy asked on the walk home.

"The two of us went out last night and had a nice time," Patrick told her.

"You went out with Duncan the Third? Does that mean...?" Wendy asked.

"We had a not-date," Patrick said, cutting her off. "We just went out to eat."

Wendy was visibly struggling with the urge to make too much of it. Grumbling, she contained her need to boss them right into a relationship. She was like a pot ready to boil over. Patrick couldn't help but laugh at her.

"Don't laugh. I'm being good," she said.

"And I appreciate it," Patrick said, and he put an arm over her shoulders. As long as she didn't go overboard, he liked having her rooting for him and Duncan to be together.

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Patrick's brief visit to the store made Duncan feel good and bad all over. It was a reminder of last night and going home unsatisfied but also happy. Spending time with Patrick was like a drug. He always needed more. Having overheard Patrick thanking Duncan for last night, Arthur came over to lean his elbows on the counter next to Duncan. To keep him from imagining anything, Duncan told him they only went out.

"I was wondering if you and Patrick were going to skip the dating phase. I'm glad you aren't. It's nice to date a guy who's already your boyfriend. I should know. Jerry takes me out all the time," Arthur bragged.

"Patrick isn't my boyfriend. It was a casual dinner," Duncan lied. He could see now that he had never spent one casual minute with Patrick since the day he met him.

Duncan's words set off a rant from Arthur.

"You make me crazy. Do you know how lucky you are? Boyfriends don't just fall out of the sky, you know. It took me forever to find Jerry. And look at you and your hot young guy who adores you. I hate you both. The right guy just walks into your life, moves in practically next door. You didn't have to go hunting for him in bars and clubs or, God forbid, on the internet. I mean, sure, there's a kid in the picture..."

"Wendy is a great kid," Duncan said. He wasn't about to let him imply that Wendy could be a problem.

"So the only hurdle is you. Get out of the way already and let your life happen," Arthur told him.

"It's already happening. I feel like I jumped onto a moving train and now I just have to go where it takes me," Duncan told him grumpily.

"Exactly!" Arthur said as if he won the argument.

Duncan wondered if it was his own fault that his employee was yelling at him.

Chapter 16

It was Wendy's last day of school. As she buzzed around the store, she was eagerly waiting for Patrick. When he got there, she announced, "I'm free!" She ran to him with open arms, and he gave her a big hug. She did well in every subject, and Patrick congratulated her.

"It's because I'm a nerd," Wendy said, trying to deflect his praise.

"Yes, you are," Patrick confirmed. "You're my pretty, little nerd."

Wendy ducked her head shyly as Patrick held her close with an arm around her shoulders. He was clearly so proud of her.

"We should do something to celebrate," Duncan said. "I was thinking we could all go out for dinner somewhere nice so you can dress up," he told Wendy.

Her eyes lit up, but then she said, "But not anywhere expensive, right?"

"Not too expensive," Duncan said. After Patrick agreed, he called to make reservations. He had to pull some strings to get them a table the same day and at a reasonable hour.

As they went home to get ready, Patrick stopped Duncan in the hall. He waited till Wendy went inside their apartment, then he said, "We're splitting the check."

Duncan started to object since he had made the invitation.

"Or I could pull rank as Wendy's brother and insist on paying for the whole thing," Patrick threatened.

Duncan had no choice but to agree.

"I feel like I would do anything to make her smile," Duncan said. Then he focused his attention on Patrick. "I think I'm too attached to both of you," he said and took Patrick in his arms.

"That's not a bad thing," Patrick told him.

As Patrick pressed him closer, Duncan buried his face in his shoulder. Keeping his hands off Patrick was torture.

"It scares the hell out of me," Duncan confessed as he straightened to meet Patrick's gaze.

"Go make yourself pretty," Patrick said, dismissing his fears. He kissed Duncan quickly then went inside.

Duncan stood there as Patrick's kiss still burned on his lips. Keeping his eyes closed tight, he played the sensation over and over – the lips partly open, their soft, sudden pressure, the hand on the back of his

neck. He let out a breath he had been holding. When he could breathe easy and look forward to every moment without fear, he would be ready.

Patrick had more trouble than usual getting ready. Work suits were one thing, but this was the first time he was dressing up for Duncan. Their not-date had been a spur of the moment thing, and he didn't have time to obsess over his clothes. He took way too long choosing a tie. By the time he was ready, Duncan was already waiting in the living room. Forgetting all about himself, Patrick zeroed in on Duncan and smiled. Seeing Duncan in a black suit with a pale blue shirt and no tie, Patrick practically drooled.

"Did you wear that so I could rip it off you?" Patrick asked keeping his voice low so Wendy couldn't hear him in her room.

"You look nice too," Duncan told him.

"I took an hour picking out a tie, and you're not wearing one."

"I'll go put one on if you insist," Duncan said.

"Better not. You're already not safe around me. If you put on a tie, I will lose it."

"Over a tie?"

"The more buttoned up you look, the more I want to tear your clothes to shreds," Patrick said, stepping closer.

Duncan sighed. Good thing Wendy came out of her room to save him.

"Is this OK?" she asked as she looked down at her dress. It was dark pink with a white belt.

"You look beautiful," Duncan told her.

"Very sophisticated," Patrick added.

Wendy smiled like she didn't quite believe them, but she liked hearing it anyway. It reminded Patrick of how their mother used to smile at compliments the exact same way.

The restaurant was called simply Lily's, but only the name showed restraint. Delicate chandeliers sparkled from the ceiling, and matching sconces were on the walls. Intricate white molding went all around the room. Giant paintings depicting idyllic scenes of genteel country life were on the walls. The chairs were slip covered with a floral fabric gathered so they looked like dresses.

"Their food is very good," Duncan said for Patrick's benefit when he saw how he looked around. "The owner does a cooking demonstration at the store, and she's always a hit. It helps promote her restaurant

and helps sell our products."

Patrick was sure Lily's wasn't to Duncan's taste either. He had picked it for Wendy, and she was in awe of the place. She looked around uncertainly then up at Duncan.

"We can go somewhere else if you don't like it," Duncan offered.

"No, it's nice. It's too nice. Are you sure it's not too expensive?" Wendy asked.

"It's not, I promise," Duncan assured her.

Patrick could tell that Duncan didn't think anything was too good for her. They even got a table by the window probably because of his inside connection. The windows were big and looked out on a quiet street. They could see the park on the other side lit by street lights just coming on.

"I'm Gail, I'll be your server tonight," their waitress said as she handed them the menus.

"Hi, Gail, I'm Wendy. It's nice to meet you. This is my brother Patrick, and this is our friend Duncan, and he's our neighbor too and my boss. We're celebrating the end of school," Wendy said.

"That's very nice," the waitress said, smiling at Wendy.

Patrick took a drink of water so he wouldn't laugh. He remembered Wendy introducing herself to waiters and waitresses since she was little. No one could convince her that it wasn't necessary.

"That would be rude," she objected whenever anyone tried to talk her out of it.

Duncan didn't even try. He seemed to have boundless patience with Wendy. Looking at the menu, Wendy frowned at the prices. They weren't too bad, but they were more than Wendy was used to. Duncan persuaded her that it was a special occasion so it was OK.

During dinner, they discussed Wendy becoming a full time employee at the store. Patrick thought that was too much to ask, but Duncan was glad to have her. Patrick was so grateful to him, and not just for looking after her. He never expected to find a guy who cared so much about Wendy. Of course, she also acted as a buffer, but there was no denying that Wendy brought out the doting father in Duncan.

Later, when they were back at the apartment and Wendy was asleep, Patrick got to enjoy having Duncan all to himself. As they were sitting close, Patrick leaned toward him. He was moving in slow motion so Duncan had plenty of time to decide if he wanted to stay or run. Duncan leaned in and parted his lips for a kiss. Patrick looked into his eyes for a final confirmation before he made contact. Duncan's

mouth was heaven. They risked kissing on the couch, but that was as far as they could go without more privacy. Patrick wasn't sure how far Duncan wanted to take things anyway. As they lay entwined, they explored each other's mouths with slow, deep kisses. Patrick tried not to grind into him, just enjoy the feel of his wonderful mouth and Duncan's fingers threading through his hair. All the while Patrick ran his hands over Duncan's body lightly, but stayed away from his cock. That didn't keep either of them from getting hard. They were supposed to be moving slowly, but Patrick wanted to make sure they didn't stall.

"Tell me it's going to happen. That we're going to be together and happy. I have my heart set on it. I don't think I can face..." Patrick said as he took a break from kissing Duncan senseless.

"Easy. Things can only go one step at a time," Duncan told him. He was a little breathless.

"I'll hold on to that."

The two of them had their arms and legs around each other, interlocked as Patrick whispered, "I plunged too far ahead without you. I feel like I jumped off a cliff, holding on to your hand, knowing you wouldn't let go and let me fall all alone into some deep, dark place."

"I wouldn't do that," Duncan confirmed, smiling at Patrick's drama.

"That's why I love you."

"Patrick," Duncan said, a little shocked.

"It's not news. You already knew I loved you."

As they lay wrapped around each other on the couch, Patrick could see Duncan struggling, trying to say something or not say it.

"Now you take it easy. I didn't ask you a question. I made a statement. It doesn't require an answer," Patrick said to let him off the hook.

"How are you going to know it if I don't say it?" Duncan asked.

Patrick could tell he wanted to, but fear was holding him back.

"The same way you knew before I said it. It's not news to either one of us that you love me."

"I'm sorry I'm being so difficult."

Patrick could see his sincere regret.

"You're worth the chase. You are my rival and my prize."

"How?"

"You and I are both fighting for your heart."

"And I don't have first dibs?"

"Definitely not."

After reluctantly letting go of Duncan so he could go to his own place and get some sleep, Patrick was too horny to sleep. His hand seemed like a poor substitute for a man like Duncan. Finally giving in, he phoned Duncan.

"I knew you weren't asleep," Patrick said triumphantly when Duncan answered right away. He knew he was the one keeping him awake.

"Hi, Patrick," Duncan said. Patrick could hear the smile in his voice.

"I'm going to phone sex you so hard," Patrick promised.

"Would you like to know what I'm wearing?" Duncan asked seductively.

"No. I'm going to tell you what you're wearing – not one damn thing. You're naked and hard under a thin, white sheet that doesn't hide anything."

"What about you?" Duncan wanted to know.

"You tell me," Patrick challenged him.

"Damn."

"Don't get shy on me, or I'll come over and show you the real thing," Patrick told him.

"You wouldn't."

"No. But you could." Patrick's breath caught in his throat at the idea.

"Sneak over wrapped in only a sheet to hide my indecent state?" Duncan said.

The thought of it made Patrick stop breathing. But he decided to get real.

"Put on something decent in case Wendy wakes up and sees you, then sneak over," Patrick told him.

"Does that mean you're serious?"

Like he needed to ask.

"Get your ass over here," Patrick demanded.

Holding the door of the apartment ajar, Patrick was waiting to drag Duncan to his bedroom. When he arrived, Duncan was perfectly decent just like it was the middle of the day. He wore a t-shirt and jeans. The only difference was that he was barefoot. Patrick liked seeing that sign that Duncan didn't want to waste any more time than he had to before coming over and getting his hands on Patrick. He just wished he could stay the night.

They tiptoed through the dark apartment then quickly closed the

door to Patrick's bedroom. In the next second, Patrick was on Duncan, pressing him into the door, kissing him in the dark.

In the middle of the night, the apartment was too quiet for what they were doing. They kept each other silent with deep, nonstop kisses, their tongues in each other's mouths. When Patrick reached for his own cock, he found that Duncan's hand was already there, undoing the string of his pajama bottoms. Duncan slipped his hand down along the trail of hairs to Patrick's hard cock. With Duncan’s touch making him even harder, Patrick’s need intensified and his cock craved the warm tight hold of any part of Duncan. Duncan groped his way down Patrick's body. In the darkened room, Patrick felt his breath on him and then the wetness of his tongue.

*

Earlier, when he went home, Duncan was angry at himself for not being able to say "I love you" to Patrick. Patrick should have been the one to get angry at him, but he took it in stride. Or did he take it on faith, faith that Duncan didn't deserve. Duncan wanted to share his faith. As long as he stayed within the circle of those strong arms, he could believe in anything. He swore to himself that one day soon Patrick would hear those words from him. More than anyone, Patrick deserved to know that he was loved. Then as he was lying awake, Patrick called him. Just the sound of his voice made Duncan smile. When Patrick invited him back, he couldn't go over fast enough. He felt the same impatience from Patrick as he kissed him suddenly as soon as they were safely in his room.

Duncan knelt in front of him. First he licked him then he let his lips brush the head of his cock. Patrick grunted. Taking the head in his mouth, Duncan licked and swirled. Rewarded by Patrick's gasps and heavy breathing, Duncan sucked, pulling in more of him at each turn. Not able to make noise, Patrick dug his fingers into his shoulders. Duncan’s hands were caressing his thighs. He felt the muscles harden under his hands. The tightening of his whole body followed, and Patrick flooded his mouth. Patrick suppressed a long moan as he ran his hands through Duncan's hair. With the taste of Patrick on his tongue, Duncan was now dying for release.

Duncan stood up. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he could see Patrick now, not just his outline. He was slumped against the door, spent and smiling. He looked into Duncan's eyes and put his arms around him. They kissed, and Duncan moaned into his mouth. Patrick unzipped him and pushed his hand in. Massaging his hard cock

through the thin fabric of his boxers, Patrick kept his tongue in Duncan's mouth. He kissed and stroked him until Duncan found it unbearable. Patrick drew back and slid his hands under his shirt and over his chest. He teased the nipples while Duncan gritted his teeth. He had to kiss Patrick or start yelling obscenities at the top of his lungs. Withdrawing his hand, Patrick grabbed the back of his head and made the kiss even deeper and harder. Feeling his extreme need, Patrick slid down his body pulling down his jeans and boxers as he went. Patrick's mouth enveloped him fast and hard, overwhelming him. Duncan ran his hands over the powerful arms that locked around him to the hands that kneaded his ass. As he slowed down, Patrick looked up at him. Caressing his face, Duncan couldn't believe how beautiful he was. His eyes fell closed and he picked up speed and moaned around Duncan's cock. Duncan felt Patrick's moans like he was an instrument Patrick was playing to perfection, hitting every note. With steady, fast movements, Patrick had him shaking. Thank God he was holding him. Duncan felt like he was pulled tight then released to fly. It was a miracle he didn't cry out. Patrick rose into his open arms and gave him soft, consoling kisses. He was wonderful, and Duncan never wanted to let him go, never wanted to be anywhere but in his arms.

They had taken enough of a risk. Now that they were somewhat satisfied, they could go to sleep. Out in the hall, they spoke in low voices.

"You got bootycalled," Patrick informed him.

"And I came running."

"There's no shame in that," Patrick said. "I would have come running if it wasn't for Wendy." He admitted.

"I'm pretty sure that there'll never be a time when I won't come running," Duncan predicted.

"Wrong. You'll already be there," Patrick said.

As he gazed at him, Duncan wanted to see the future as clearly as Patrick did.

Chapter 17

The next morning, Patrick and Wendy were cleaning up after breakfast. Wendy watched him like a hawk as he put a spoon in the dishwasher. She was making sure he wasn't mixing up the utensils. After she saw how Duncan sorted his dishes, she enforced his system with a vengeance. Duncan never pushed his own way of doing things on Patrick. Every thought of him, even how he did the dishes, made Patrick smile. Seeing the smile, Wendy looked at him suspiciously.

For now, Patrick didn't want Wendy too involved in how his relationship with Duncan was progressing. She enjoyed Duncan's company, and that was enough. She was too eager to put herself in charge of their relationship already. But Patrick felt he needed to tell her something, just not too much. Until he and Duncan were officially in a relationship, Patrick didn't want her to know that they were sleeping together.

"I wanted to tell you that Duncan and I are kind of seeing each other."

"Yes!" she said, ready to celebrate.

"Don't start pushing," Patrick warned her seeing how enthusiastic she was. "Duncan had a boyfriend before, but things didn't work out. He got his heart broken, and he needs time. I am giving him time, and you will too. Right?" he knew if he engaged her compassion, she was more likely to behave herself.

"I will. Promise," she said solemnly then she smiled at Patrick. He could see that she wasn't just glad to have Duncan in their lives, she was happy for Patrick too.

*

When Duncan went over to pick up Wendy so they could go to the store together, she was smiling at him in that way he found a little worrying. Duncan wished Patrick was there, not that he was much help, but Patrick was still getting ready.

"I'm glad you and Patrick are kind of seeing each other, but I promise I won't be pushy. And I'm sorry some mean guy broke your heart." Her expression was full of sympathy for him. He smiled at her.

"You don't need to worry about me," he told her.

"Sure I do," she said emphatically. "You're a Duncan."

"Just don't worry too much then."

"I won't because Patrick and I are here to keep you from being sad."

Duncan couldn't even speak. The idea that this kid who lost her parents should worry about him being sad was too much.

That evening, Patrick and Duncan spent time together after Wendy was in bed. Patrick talked to him about what he wanted Wendy to know and why.

"Now that you are teaming up against me, I'm going to be fighting a war on two fronts," Duncan complained.

"You should surrender," Patrick told him. The look in his eyes promised good things would follow.

"And I feel so guilty."

"Why?"

"Wendy is feeling sorry for me after what you guys have been through," Duncan explained.

"Yeah. Losing our parents was worse for her. She wasn't done being a kid yet," Patrick said "But you're never done being a kid to your parents. Mom would never let me eat anything without asking me if I washed my hands."

"That's why I can't stand to have Wendy worrying about me."

"She is such a strong kid. She wants to lend her strength to everyone," Patrick said with a proud but sad smile. "I think Wendy is still staying strong for me, and of course I'm trying to stay strong for her. Last year she had her first birthday without Mom and Dad. We cried and ate cake. Her last birthday was right before they died. All those firsts. It's like there's this darkness around every corner." Seeing Duncan's concerned look, he added, "We're doing OK, but I don't know what I would do without Wendy."

"She's one great kid," Duncan said with a smile.

"As long as you stay on her good side."

The days after their parents died were so hard. Patrick remembered how he needed to have a look at Wendy in the middle of the night and even during the day to make sure that she was OK. The anxiety at having her out of his sight was so strong that he kept her out of school even after she was ready to go back. She seemed to him as helpless and vulnerable as a baby. He knew he couldn't treat her that way. He told himself, "I can't let her down. I can't let down Mom and Dad." He had to act like a good big brother even as he was ready to break down at every moment. At first he was forcing himself to act rational, like a responsible, sane adult Wendy could count on. After a while, that's who he became.

"You two really had to lean on each other. I'm surprised Wendy isn't more possessive of you instead of pushing you to have a boyfriend," Duncan said.

"She's plenty possessive. When she was little, she overheard Mom saying that her friend Linda was her best friend. Wendy went scrunchy faced and tearful, saying, 'But I'm your best friend, Mommy.' Mom totally caved. She demoted Linda to second best friend status and promised Wendy they were best friends forever." Memories of his mom and Wendy came back to Patrick so clearly. He could see Mom tickling Wendy as she giggled. "Wendy brought Mom and Dad so much joy. The first New Year's Eve when Wendy tried to stay up, she fell asleep across Mom and Dad's laps. Mom whispered the countdown in her ear then kissed her on the cheek." Suddenly Patrick got choked up and gulped air. It was hard to breathe thinking of his mom, how sweet and loving she was, and that adoring look his dad had just for Wendy.

"Sorry," he said to Duncan in a whisper.

Duncan had taken hold of him, worried. He rubbed his back then wrapped him in a hug.

"Sorry," Patrick said again as he tried to regain control of himself.

"You don't have to fight it," Duncan told him. "You're grieving for yourself and for Wendy too."

"It's so hard for her," Patrick said, his voice breaking.

"She has you."

He leaned heavily against Duncan, buried his face in his shoulder and let grief overtake him. To help him calm down a little, he talked about the gift that his parents had left him.

"I was an only child for a long time," Patrick said. "Wendy was a surprise. I think Mom and Dad had trouble conceiving another kid after they had me. When she got pregnant with Wendy after all that time, Mom was afraid she might jinx the pregnancy so she wouldn't talk about it. I didn't know that then. I just teased her. 'Mom, you're definitely pregnant.' She was out to here. Mom was hilarious, she kept telling me, 'I'm not pregnant. I'm just fat.' I agreed with her. 'Yes, very, very fat.' When Wendy was born, Mom was like hysterically happy. Mom and Dad were so crazy about her. I pretended I was too old to be jealous. Wendy grew so fast though. She used to run around and grab up everything like the whole world was hers. She didn't know that the whole world was more than she could hold in her little hands."

Patrick was quiet for a while. Duncan had his arms around him, making him feel stronger even as he leaned on him for comfort.

Patrick straightened to gaze at Duncan.

"Now that I've met you, I don't think I could face not having you in my life," he said to Duncan, who had that incredible strength to him as well as kindness.

"Any time you need me, I'll be here," Duncan said.

Patrick took his hand and held it for a moment to reassure both Duncan and himself that he was OK. Then he leaned in and kissed him. As he moved to straddle his lap, Patrick felt Duncan's hands on his ass.

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Duncan put an arm around Patrick's back, opening himself up so Patrick could get closer. He felt Patrick slip an arm around him and rest his head on his shoulder.

"I need you."

With Patrick's body pressed against him, Duncan's tender feelings turned into pure lust. He was ashamed of himself a little, but Patrick was breathing in his scent in a way that was unmistakably sexual.

"I miss you every second I'm not with you," Patrick said.

Duncan was breathing hard now.

"Me too," he said.

"Tell me when you're ready, and you'll have me all over you till you can't stand it."

Duncan ran his hands over the sides of Patrick's face. They kissed hungrily then moved to Patrick's bedroom. They sucked each other off quietly, this time on the floor, head to toe. Patrick tried to rush, but Duncan made him keep pace.

"That was good, naked fun," Patrick said when he walked him to his door. He held Duncan close and told him, "Dream about me."

"I already dream about you. You are with me every second of every night and day, and you have been since the day we met," Duncan told him.

"In that case, keep up the good work," Patrick told him and kissed him.

Duncan sighed not wanting to let him go. They separated unwillingly, clinging to each other until the last moment.

Waking up the next morning, Duncan missed Patrick's hands on his body, the way he held his waist as he lowered himself to his knees in

front of him nuzzling his way down to his cock. He then pulled Duncan down and told him he wanted to sixty-nine.

Duncan was still thinking about that at work when Stacy came by the store. Duncan only realized it when he looked up and saw her beaming at him.

"You don't know how nice it is to see you happy," she said.

"Why is everyone accusing me of being happy?"

Stacy only laughed at him. When she asked about the house, she was surprised to hear that it still wasn't for sale.

"Don't you think it's about time? Hell, it's past time. Spring is gone. That was the perfect time to show it off," she said.

"Every time I think of selling, I see Patrick and Wendy there," Duncan confessed.

"They factor into your decision? You are in so deep," Stacy told him.

"They look so right in my house." And Patrick would look just right in his bed, Duncan thought but didn't say. "My life right now revolves around them. I've given up fighting it. I'm just going to have to let Patrick break my heart."

"The more love the more pain. I'm afraid that's how it works," she said.

"More? I barely survived last time."

"But did Jason really ever sink in deep like that?"

Duncan tried his best to ignore the sexual implications of what she said.

"I don't even know any more. My relationship with him was all wrapped up with my hopes and plans for a perfect life."

"And Patrick just grabs you by the balls and won't let go."

"You are so unladylike," Duncan teased her, but he couldn't disagree. "And you're a big Patrick fan."

"I'm a fan of you and anyone who can make you happy," Stacy said because she wasn't just unladylike, she was also sweet. "You're this close to having what you've been dreaming about."

"If I'm brave enough to take a chance on another young guy."

"Not just another young guy, a guy you love, who loves you. Only you can decide what that's worth."

It was worth everything. Duncan thought about how both Patrick and Wendy were being so brave when they were going through so much. He admired Patrick for being such a good big brother to Wendy, and kicked himself for being such a coward. But soon, he knew he would take a step closer to being worthy of them.

Chapter 18

Carrying groceries, Patrick came by The Copper Kettle to pick up Wendy, but she wasn't ready to go home yet.

"New stuff came in today. We haven't finished setting everything up," Wendy said.

"We can't stay. I have frozen stuff in the bags." Patrick lifted the shopping bags to emphasize his point.

"You go," Wendy told him. "I'll stay and make sure the displays look nice."

"I'm sure Duncan..." Patrick started to say.

"I'll be right there," Wendy said and pushed him toward the door.

"Don't pay her overtime," Patrick told Duncan as he was pushed out the door. "And come over for dinner!" he yelled out as the door closed, and Wendy waved at him.

A little after Patrick left, Duncan noticed someone waiting by the main register. To his shock, Duncan saw the familiar blond hair and the body he once knew intimately. As Duncan went up to him, Jason smiled.

"This is a surprise," Duncan said. He didn't bother returning the smile or otherwise pretending he was happy to see him.

"I just wanted to see how you were doing. You look better than ever," Jason said, searching his face for something.

Noticing that this was more than a casual chat with a customer, Wendy came over.

"Who is he?" she asked, staring at Jason intently.

"This is my ex..."

"The bad one," she jumped in to say. "Shame on you!"

"Wendy," Duncan said to her.

She just stared from him to Jason but wouldn't leave them alone.

"Can we have a little privacy?" Duncan asked her. Seeing Melissa coming in for her shift, Duncan asked her to walk Wendy home. He didn't want either of them there while he talked with Jason. Thank God Arthur had the day off.

"OK," Wendy agreed, but she was very reluctant to leave Duncan. "Be careful. Don't let him charm you. Remember he's no good." She threw one last "shame on you" at Jason and stalked out.

"Why are you here?" Duncan asked him once the door closed behind

Wendy and Melissa.

"I know you don't get over things easily. I just wanted to make sure you were OK."

"I'm fine," Duncan assured him just as he saw Wendy peering at them through the store window.

Duncan gave her a stern look. Wendy went away after a quick glare at Jason and a stay strong gesture for Duncan.

"Who is that girl?" Jason asked.

"Never mind," Duncan told him.

"I guess a better question is whose kid is she," Jason said, sounding jealous.

"She lives with her brother if that's what you're asking me."

"I guess I am," Jason said, seeing something in his expression that confirmed his suspicions. "And I guess I don't need to worry about you."

"No, you don't," Duncan told him coldly.

After a tight smile, Jason left.

Even though Jason was barely out the door, all Duncan could think about was Patrick. Seeing Jason made him think how beautiful Patrick was, and that it wasn't just skin deep. The way he smiled and the look in his eyes were so warm and unguarded, like he was always reaching out to Duncan. Right then, Duncan wanted to take him into his arms so much and give him everything, every part of himself, everything he had been holding back, all his love. He was so close to believing that their love could endure. He actually felt impatient with himself, wanting to yell, "Hurry up and get your shit together."

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Patrick was putting away the last of the groceries and starting to set up what they needed for dinner when Wendy rushed into the apartment. She had a fierce look in her eyes.

"It was a blond! A blond bimbo broke Duncan's heart," she said and punched the air.

"How do you know?"

"I saw him with Duncan at the store," Wendy said.

"Oh," Patrick said. He had a little trouble breathing.

Wendy noticed something was off.

"Patrick?"

"So he was cute?"

"No! He was ugly like a slug," she said.

"Really? An ugly, blond slug?"

"Yes!"

Seeing her all worked up, Patrick had to ask, "Were you good?"

"Not too good," Wendy said without regret.

When Duncan showed up a little later, Patrick looked at him hard, searching for any sign of what happened with Jason. He didn't see much. Duncan seemed more pleased than upset. Patrick didn't know what to think of that. He was glad Wendy was in her room, on the phone with one of her friends, so he could speak his mind.

"I wasn't sure you were going to show up. I heard you got really busy at the store," Patrick said, not hiding his feelings.

"You mean Jason," Duncan said.

"A sneaky visit to your place of work, that's just so low," Patrick blustered. He kind of felt like punching something too.

"Sneaky?" Duncan said, looking amused.

"You know it is. Classic ex boyfriend shit. Just casually dropping in to unsettle you."

"He didn't unsettle me."

"He didn't?" Patrick said, surprised and relieved.

"Jason doesn't have that kind of power over me. Only you do."

"Good. But if he comes by again..." Patrick didn't know what he would do.

Duncan laughed.

"You can't be jealous of Jason," he said.

"I'm not supposed to be jealous of a guy you can't stop thinking about, a guy who's standing in the way of us being together. I hate his guts."

"I'm the guy standing in the way, not him."

"Oh, I know. I am not too happy with you either. But don't worry. I'll wear you down." Patrick frowned at Duncan. "Are you sure he isn't still interested in you?"

"He was never interested in me. He just used me as a base of operations," Duncan said bitterly. Seeing Patrick raise an eyebrow, he said, "I'm entitled to a little bitterness."

"Were you a total bitch to him?" Patrick asked.

"That's not how I would put it, but yes," he admitted.

"I bet Wendy was in fine form."

"She was every inch the tigress. Actually I was going to ask her to help me check out the competition tomorrow. There's a new store opening on Barber Street," Duncan said.

"Are you changing the subject?" Patrick accused him.

"No. I'm telling you my plans for tomorrow."

"OK. Then I'll tell you mine. Tomorrow dinner will be on me. I want to go check out the Pineborough Hotel," Patrick had been planning to do that for a while.

"So you're checking out the competition too?"

"Not exactly. When we drove by it on the way to your house, I thought it might be a good opportunity."

"You want to work there," Duncan realized.

"It would be a step up from Bartley, but I wanted to take a closer look first."

For some reason Duncan had a confused smile on his face.

"What?"

"My brain has strange ideas," Duncan said, not revealing much about what was on his mind.

"Are they sexual?" Patrick asked hopefully.

Duncan refused to answer.

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When Patrick mentioned the possibility of working at the Pineborough Hotel, Duncan thought to himself, "That's perfect. It's only fifteen minutes from the house." The thought came to him so naturally, like he and Patrick already lived there together. In his mind, Patrick had already moved in. After Jason, Duncan couldn't see a happy future for himself. More and more these days, he felt like he was living it. He sometimes smiled for no reason other than he knew he would be spending time with Patrick. These days he looked forward to seeing Patrick at least once every day. When Patrick came by The Copper Kettle to pick up Wendy, he usually stayed a while or they made plans for later in the evening. Their lives were intertwined.

Coming out of her room, Wendy smiled and peered at him intently. Duncan was amazed at how happy she looked whenever she saw him.

"How did it go? Were you strong?" she asked.

Duncan had almost forgotten about Jason's visit. Even the Jason of minutes ago was in his distant past.

"I was strong," he assured her. He wouldn't have been if it weren't

for Patrick and Wendy in his life. Patrick had something about him that was steady and real, grounded in love. Wendy always greeted Duncan with enthusiasm as did Patrick in a different way. The feeling that he belonged with them was so strong. Without his hesitation and fear, they would already be happy together like they were any time he joined them whether to go somewhere or just stay home.

After nodding with approval at Duncan, Wendy went to the kitchen to see what Patrick was planning for dinner. Having noticed that Duncan had something on his mind, Patrick lingered next to him.

"I think it's time," Duncan said.

Patrick understood his meaning from his tone more than from those few words.

"I'm about to jump to conclusions, you better stop me if I'm wrong," Patrick warned him.

"You're not wrong. I lost this war a long time ago. It's time I stop fighting. I was yours from the second I met you."

"And you'll be mine forever," Patrick told him.

"What's going on?" Wendy asked them. She came out from the kitchen, holding a carrot almost like she was threatening them with it.

"Put down the carrot. Duncan just agreed to be my boyfriend," Patrick told her.

She actually jumped for joy.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes!"

She rushed over to give Patrick and Duncan a hug. She looked up at Duncan and smiled.

"You're still not cute," she told him. "But you're brave like a tree."

"What?" Patrick asked.

"I know what she means," Duncan said. "We saw a brave tree once."

Patrick hugged him and kissed him.

"This is allowed now," he said to Duncan. "You're my man."

"Keep it PG," Wendy warned them.

As Patrick made Wendy guess what he was planning for dinner, Duncan stood back. He felt strange and unfocused, a little shaky. Good thing Wendy was taking charge of him. For now, he just needed to do what she told him. He joined them to help with dinner just as Patrick saluted Wendy and got to work peeling potatoes. Patrick was at the sink. Duncan was on chopping duty next to him. Just standing shoulder to shoulder with him felt good. They were partners now. Officially together, they exchanged meaningful glances while Wendy

yelled, "PG" any time they nuzzled each other or kissed.

Since their relationship was still new to Wendy, Duncan went home instead of spending the night with Patrick. He had that same strange, unreal feeling when he went to bed and when he woke up. He kept asking himself, "Did I really do it?" Maybe because he decided it so suddenly, it seemed like a dream.

At work he had the same feeling again when he saw Patrick at the window of the store. It was lunchtime. Instead of coming in, Patrick motioned to him toward their apartment building and then he was gone before Wendy could see him.

Duncan didn't waste a second. He was out of there as soon as he told Arthur he was going and that Wendy was in charge. But that didn't really need to be said. Arthur's look was priceless though.

"I'm glad you came. I have Angie covering for me, but I shouldn't be here," Patrick said when Duncan caught up to him on the sidewalk. They practically ran to their apartment building.

"Don't risk your job for me," Duncan warned him.

"I'm hoping to get another one, remember? Now make it worth my while," Patrick said as he impatiently pushed the button to call the elevator.

In the elevator, Duncan ran his hand down his arm and took his hand. Rushing into his arms, Patrick hugged him tight. Duncan pulled Patrick even closer until there was no space between them, not even room to breathe. Duncan's hands swept down his back as he kissed his neck. His hands found Patrick's ass and squeezed, pulling him hard against Duncan and his rock hard cock. The contact made them both moan. Their cocks were trapped between them, rubbing together.

As Duncan unlocked his door, Patrick couldn't keep his hands off him.

"I had to see you after yesterday. You made my day," Patrick said.

Duncan turned and saw the loving look in his eyes for a second before Patrick started kissing him or more like devouring him.

Letting go, Patrick took his jacket off as he rushed through Duncan's apartment. He threw it on the floor, and Duncan picked it up. As Patrick shook his head at him, Duncan draped it over a chair in his bedroom. Patrick's shirt and tie were next. Loosening his tie, he pulled them off without unbuttoning his shirt. He threw them to Duncan for more gentle treatment. Undoing the belt, the button and his fly with quick motions, Patrick let his pants drop. He stepped out of them and let the sight of his naked body give Duncan some ideas about what he

should do next. Duncan had stripped along with him, but only as an afterthought. His attention was fully on Patrick's body being revealed for his benefit.

Circling him, Duncan slipped his hand over the back of his neck and down his back. When he faced him again, Patrick drew close. Duncan felt their jutting cocks brush against one another.

"Better make it memorable," Patrick challenged him.

Turning away from him, Duncan opened his bedside drawer and shoved lube at him. He kneeled and slipped the condom on Patrick's cock with his mouth. He was up in a second, leaving Patrick dazed.

"You wanted it memorable," Duncan told him before positioning himself on his back on his bed.

"With you it's always memorable. Fucking you isn't like fucking anyone else," Patrick told him.

Patrick didn't waste time. He had himself and Duncan lubed in no time. As Patrick pushed in, they both breathed hard. Duncan hooked his legs around Patrick's back to encourage him. Caressing his face, Duncan let Patrick suck on his fingers. He didn't want him distracted though. He wanted him to keep that strong, steady rhythm going. It was doing unbelievable things to him. Sweating, Patrick was pumping in and out of him as they both moaned. Dizzy with pleasure that filled him at every plunge of Patrick's cock, Duncan writhed under him. He held on to Patrick's arms like they were his anchor. He felt them up. He loved the way muscles curved over Patrick's arm, hard as steel. They made a beautiful shape when he fucked him. Plowing Duncan hard now, Patrick gasped his name. Duncan was coming too. He had just enough presence of mind to catch Patrick as he collapsed into his arms. Patrick's face was buried in the crook of his neck. He moaned softly in Duncan's ear as he came down.

Duncan made sure not to let Patrick get too comfortable. He handed him his clothes. While putting his own clothes on, Duncan watched Patrick's legs as his pants went on. His eyes naturally moved to his ass. Noticing Duncan watching his reverse striptease, Patrick smirked then pulled the pants over his ass slowly.

"You don't have time to put on a show. You'll be late for work," Duncan reminded him.

After checking the time, Patrick hurried up and got dressed. Duncan straightened his collar and otherwise checked him over to make sure he looked presentable. Patrick kissed him then asked, "Do I pass inspection?"

"You are every inch a hardworking young man."

"And not a total slut who snuck away for a nooner?"

"No one would ever guess," Duncan assured him. He kissed him at the door then again in the elevator.

That's where Duncan realized that the strange feeling was gone. This was real, and it was wonderful. To have a lover gave him so much to look forward to every day. All the little surprises and moments if joy waited around the corner.

Seeing him lost in thought Patrick touched his face to bring him back. He stood so close, Duncan could feel the intoxicating heat of his body. His mouth was next to his ear, his lips grazing his earlobe as he whispered, "From now on we'll do this again and again."

"You'll need a longer lunch break," Duncan told him.

"I had to thank you for making me so happy," Patrick said.

"I felt every inch of your gratitude," Duncan said, and Patrick laughed.

"God, I love you," he said just as he stepped off the elevator. He was running out of the lobby and to his car before Duncan could say it back.

Chapter 19

Patrick and Wendy were on their way to Cory's. He had invited them to dinner. He included Duncan in his invitation, but Duncan decided it was time to reorganize the storeroom at The Copper Kettle. Patrick had a feeling that Duncan didn't want to be trapped with all of them when Patrick announced their relationship was official. He had good instincts. Ben knew no mercy. God knows what Wendy might blurt out. And Cory could go either way.

"Hi, Cory. Hi, Jailbait," Wendy said as Cory opened the door and she went in.

"Make her stop calling me that," Ben told Patrick.

"It's on my list."

"I'm going to forget that I even have a name," Ben said.

"Show her the game," Cory ordered him.

Ben grumbled as he led Wendy to his room.

"He found some girly video game at a thrift store. He said Wendy would like it so I bought it."

"Thanks. I'll have her killing zombies one of these days."

"Keep dreaming," Cory told him. Then he wanted to know about him and Duncan.

He questioned him while they set the table. As they talked, Patrick remembered how Duncan set a table with care but without fuss. He was smiling over that, picturing Duncan looking at him with that expression he put on when Patrick teased him. He almost missed what Cory was saying.

"You didn't just risk your heart. You risked Wendy's too," Cory said, always ready to scold him.

"Yeah. I never had to worry about that before. But things are moving along nicely now."

"How can you get any traction with Wendy always tagging along?" Ben asked, back from his room just in time to overhear them.

Patrick was ready to rip his head off, but he saw that Wendy didn't hear that. She was still in his room, playing the game. He turned to Ben to set him straight.

"Wendy isn't tagging along. And are you volunteering to baby-sit?" Patrick asked, seeing an opportunity to entrap him.

"You walked into that one," Cory told him.

"Whatever. It took you guys forever. I had my boyfriend bagged and tagged in a week," Ben boasted.

"My boyfriend is a real man."

"More like Iceman," Ben said.

"I defrosted him. I was using body heat so it took time," Patrick told him.

"Ugh. Stop grossing me out. I'm a minor," Ben said just as Wendy came back.

"What's gross?" she asked.

"That Arthur guy," Ben said.

"Arthur from the store? He isn't gross. He just isn't cute. Not everyone can be cute," Wendy told him vehemently.

"His face makes me want to chop his head off because that body is nice," Ben told her.

"Body?" Wendy said, grimacing.

"Do you only see guys from the neck up?" Ben asked her.

"Yes!" Patrick answered for her. "And that's how we're going to keep it."

Patrick gave Duncan the good news that Ben agreed to stay with Wendy so they could go out. Duncan said he would handle the arrangements. On their date night, Ben came in early, grinning at his phone.

"That must be one good text," Patrick teased him.

"My boyfriend sent me a pic."

"Boyfriend? Let me see," Wendy demanded. Once she saw Ben's boyfriend, she frowned then grudgingly said, "OK."

"Did my boyfriend just get her approval?" Ben asked, surprised.

"Is he cute and too young for me?" Patrick asked.

"Of course," Ben said.

"Then yes."

Once again, Patrick was fretting over his ties. He considered going without like Duncan did, but he didn't want to be a copycat. He showed Ben the tie he picked. Ben made a disgusted face. That meant it was perfect. Wendy had already voted against it. She watched him tie it like it was a magic act.

"I thought you were going on a date, not a job interview," Ben told him, seeing how carefully he tied his tie.

"When you're giving someone an awesome gift, you don't wrap it in old newspapers," Patrick bragged.

"You have a gift for Duncan? What gift?" Wendy asked.

"Clueless. He's talking about himself. He's the gift," Ben told her.

"That's conceited. Don't be conceited, Patrick. No one likes that," Wendy warned him.

"I'm not," Patrick said defensively.

At the door, Ben told him, "Go get your man."

"Yeah. Go get your man," Wendy said too.

"Do you know what they're going to be doing?" Ben asked.

"What?" Wendy asked innocently.

"You shouldn't be asking that," Patrick told her then he told Ben, "And you shouldn't be answering." He gave him a warning look.

Waiting for him by his door, Duncan was a vision, but he always was. Wendy clapped when she saw them together. Ben shook his head. Suits weren't his thing.

Dinner was at a very nice restaurant. Wendy would not approve of the prices. The decor was elegant and austere. She wouldn't approve of that either. It was definitely an adult night out. Patrick could have held the menu upside down and it would have made as much sense to him. Duncan recommended a grass fed beef dish. The food was amazing. There wasn't a lot of it, but it was as good as sex with any other man but Duncan.

"Speaking of," Patrick said. They weren't actually speaking of anything. The last thing Patrick said was an orgasmic "Mmmmmh" over a mouthful of food. A mouthful of Duncan was the only thing better, and that was what was on his mind. "Where are we going after this?"

Duncan kept his voice down as he answered.

"We've had a few quickies. Tonight I want to go somewhere where I can take my time with you."

"In that case, you can take me anywhere you want," Patrick told him.

"The Pineborough Hotel."

Patrick was surprised.

"You want to defile my future place of employment?" Patrick had already applied there, and his interview went well.

Duncan told him his plan.

"I'll get a room and sneak you in so you won't get a reputation. It will give you a chance to test out the accommodations."

"They better have some sturdy furniture," Patrick said, leering at

Duncan.

Patrick had a good impression of the Pineborough Hotel already, and it was about to become one of his favorite places. The grounds were natural but well maintained. There was even a playground. The hotel interior was modern but in a cheerful way, not stark. There was a lot of pale blue and green glass and appealing abstract art. The leather seats were gray, modern but comfortable. Duncan went up to the desk while Patrick lurked in the lobby then meandered his way to the elevators.

"What do you think?" Duncan asked him when they got to the room.

"Gorgeous," Patrick said, looking at Duncan not the room.

The room was very nice – soothing colors, more modern furniture, pleasant view, whatever. Duncan was all he could see. Patrick walked up to him and started undressing him slowly. With brief, light caresses, he enjoyed every inch of Duncan's skin. Following his lead, Duncan pulled Patrick's jacket off his shoulders, undid his tie then the buttons of his shirt. Duncan's fingers barely grazed his skin as he stripped him. The minimal contact made Patrick breathe hard with anticipation. A feathery touch along the length of his cock as his boxers came off made him shudder.

They both stood naked and hard, looking into each other's eyes one moment, letting their eyes roam each other's bodies hungrily the next. Patrick was dying to but didn't kiss him yet. He wanted to see what Duncan would do, where he would touch him, where he would kiss him.

Duncan backed him to the bed and had him lie down. Hovering over him, Duncan let his lips glide along Patrick's shoulder. Patrick shivered but resisted the urge to pull Duncan down to him for more. Following the line of his collarbone, Duncan set his lips on Patrick's nipple. He grazed one with his fingernail, one with his teeth until both stood out for him to lick. His nipples hardened, Patrick gasped, but Duncan was already moving on. He kissed and licked Patrick's navel making him moan. He couldn't wait to feel his mouth even lower. Brushing his lips over the hairs leading to his cock, Duncan veered off toward his thigh. Only his breath caressed Patrick's rock hard cock. Patrick moaned, dizzy with lust building up in him, waiting to be unleashed on the one who made it grow and would set it free. No one had ever been tortured so sweetly. The touches of Duncan's lips were so soft, they were like ghosts of kisses. Sometimes he only felt Duncan's breath warming him as his hands barely touched him. His tongue teased and tormented him. He felt like every inch of him was

humming, singing some wordless tune meant only for Duncan.

Patrick arched his hips toward Duncan. Duncan denied him, until suddenly he was there. Duncan's mouth slid down from the head of his cock and over the shaft and wrapped tightly around his cock. The ecstasy on Duncan's face, together with the sensation Patrick experienced, almost made him come. Even as he shuddered at the pure pleasure, Patrick still said, "Stop. I want you inside me."

Freeing his cock, Duncan looked at him questioningly.

"Fuck me. You did this to me. Now give me what I need," Patrick told him. He wanted Duncan in every way he could have him, and this was the perfect chance.

Duncan only nodded and got into position. Patrick put his legs on Duncan's shoulders just like Duncan had done the first time they fucked. After staring deep into his eyes, Duncan pulled him closer. He lubed a finger and slowly worked it inside him, never braking eye contact. Patrick almost whimpered at that first intrusion. It had been a long time since he wanted this, and now he wanted it more than anything. Patrick tried to rush him, but Duncan took his time until he was sure Patrick was ready.

Duncan was gentle, letting Patrick's tight hole open to him under steady pressure. Feeling every inch that stretched him, Patrick only wanted more until Duncan filled him. He let out shuddering breaths as Duncan rested deep inside him. Duncan knew just when to start moving again. It was just before Patrick demanded it. Hearing Patrick's body speaking to him, Duncan gave him exactly what he needed, pumping slow but hard. Any little bit of pain Patrick felt was subdued by pleasure, turning into a deep, sweet ache. Louder deeper moans than he had ever dared to let out before escaped him. No one before had brought those sounds or those feelings out of him. Every part of his body knew that Duncan was the one and cried out in desperate need for him. Patrick came before he wanted to. He was too aroused to last when he had the man he loved deep inside him. He smiled up at Duncan, who stopped and kissed him.

"Now make me come again," he challenged Duncan. He just didn't want him to stop.

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Patrick wanted him to keep fucking, but first Duncan wanted him hard again. He pulled out and told Patrick, "Be patient."

Patrick moaned. He was a beautiful sight as he threw his head back. His neck was exposed for kissing now, and Duncan took full

advantage. Letting his hands roam all over his body, Duncan kissed his face then his lower lip. He didn't let his mouth linger on those tempting lips that opened for his kiss. He kissed him lower along his jaw, his earlobe. Under his kiss, he felt Patrick's pulse throbbing like a small heart and his throat working as he swallowed. Patrick's body held so many temptations. Duncan trailed licks and kisses down Patrick's chest. He could feel Patrick struggling under him, yearning for satisfaction but being denied.

"You're dying to jump me, aren't you," Duncan accused him.

"No, I'm dying for you, and I'll let you torture me and love every minute of it. You're cruel and mean, and I love you," Patrick whispered then moaned, "Duncan, I love you."

"I love you too," Duncan said, finally letting the words spill from his heart.

"Duncan," Patrick gasped.

"Shh, I'm busy," Duncan said to him as he wrapped his lips around the head of his cock.

He moaned as Patrick hardened even more in his mouth. Patrick rubbed the back of his head. Willing himself to stop, Duncan moved up and kissed Patrick's mouth. He watched Patrick smile then catch his breath as Duncan entered him again. Patrick's hands clutched at his sides. He was so wonderfully tight. It took all of Duncan's willpower to wait for him so they could come together. Then Patrick tightened around him and arched up into him, coming over both of them. Duncan followed, falling blissfully into Patrick's arms. Slowly, they relaxed into each other, happy and content.

"Did you mean to say I love you before or did it just slip out?" Patrick wanted to know.

"Of course I did, but I didn't know it would feel like that. Like my heart would burst."

"It's out now," Patrick teased him then he grew more compassionate. "Don't look so scared. It wasn't exactly a secret. If you're not ready to say it, I promise not to make a big deal out of it," Patrick reassured him.

"But it is a big deal. I love you." As Duncan said it he looked into Patrick's eyes.

Patrick had on a happy grin and tears in his eyes.

"It's amazing to hear those words from you. You made me happy," Patrick told him and kissed him. Then he gave Duncan a serious look and warned him, "I won't settle for anything less than everything."

"You have me where you want me, what more do you want?"

Duncan asked though he couldn't deny him anything he asked for.

"Oh, this isn't it. This is just the beginning. When I have you where I want you, we'll both have rings on our fingers," Patrick told him. Not giving Duncan a chance to catch his breath, he kissed him.

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It was too bad they couldn't stay all night with their arms and legs around each other like one inseparable being. Patrick didn't want to let go of Duncan. He just wanted to stay like that, skin to skin forever. Without realizing he had fallen asleep, he woke up in Duncan's arms.

"How long has it been?" Patrick asked a little worried since he didn't know what time it was.

"Not too long," Duncan assured him as he handed him his phone.

"I told Wendy after eleven. Since our parents died, she worries if I'm late and I don't call," Patrick explained and got out of bed.

"I wish you had told me. I wouldn't have let you sleep. But after eleven isn't really a specific time," Duncan pointed out reasonably. He gave Patrick his pants and boxers then put on his own.

"It is to Wendy. After eleven is one minute after eleven," Patrick said as he dialed.

"Will she even be up?" Duncan wondered.

"With Ben babysitting? She'll be up."

"It's OK," Wendy told him when he apologized.

He apologized again when he came home.

"It's OK," Wendy told him again. She was ready for bed but still up.

Now that he was looking at her, Patrick could see how she grinned at him, not worried at all.

"You weren't worried?" Patrick asked.

"Not if you're with Duncan. I knew if you were together, it was OK."

"You're right. Duncan would keep me safe no matter what." Patrick was kind of joking, but Wendy nodded in sincere agreement. She had so much faith in him, and Patrick did too.

Chapter 20

It was after work on Friday, and Patrick came into The Copper Kettle.

"Look what I got," Patrick said as he held up a watermelon. "Who wants to get messy? Raise your hand, Wendy."

"I'm not going to get messy," she told him defensively.

"You'll have watermelon juice from ear to ear," Patrick teased her.

"I will not."

"Want to help us eat it?" Patrick asked Duncan.

"What if we take it to the house?" Duncan proposed.

"Let's do it," Wendy voted. "But this time I'm bringing pajamas."

"He didn't invite us to stay overnight," Patrick pointed out.

"Not yet," Wendy said.

"We can go today and stay the whole weekend if you like," Duncan said looking at Patrick to see if it was OK.

Patrick grinned, but Duncan wanted an actual answer.

"Well?"

"Do I have to stay in the guest room again?" Patrick asked.

"Where else?" Wendy asked then she realized what he meant. "You want to stay in Duncan's room! Is that allowed?" she asked Duncan.

"Allowed? It's required," Patrick said more to Duncan than to Wendy.

"Not until we make it official," Duncan said.

"What? What are you saying?" Patrick asked both disappointed and eager to know more.

"I'm saying don't be pushy."

Wendy nodded, approving of Duncan's tough stance.

Patrick grumbled as all three of them set off together for their apartment building.

"We can help you get your house ready for selling it," Wendy offered.

"I was thinking we might just go to enjoy ourselves," Duncan said.

"That too, but we shouldn't slack off too much," Wendy said.

"Listen to her cracking the whip," Patrick complained.

"We'll make sure to keep busy," Duncan told her.

Patrick hoped he meant busy doing nothing, especially in this heat. As Wendy ran into the apartment to get her stuff together for the

weekend, Patrick turned to Duncan.

"You're OK with going there?" Patrick asked.

"The house is just sitting there empty. We might as well use it," Duncan said.

Patrick watched Duncan's face carefully but saw no sign of any second thoughts. As if to confirm his answer, Duncan leaned in and kissed him. Standing there, holding that watermelon, Patrick still tried to grab hold of him and prolong the kiss.

"You'll drop it," Duncan warned him.

"You started it."

Recklessly, Duncan kissed him again. When he smiled at Patrick before going to pack, there was no trace of anything but happiness in his eyes. Patrick was happy too. They were going to the house where he and Duncan had sex for the first time, and now they would again. Plus going back to the house was a sure sign that Duncan's past was losing its hold on him.

They parked in front of the house in the late afternoon. The weather was hotter than the last time they were there. As they stepped out of the car, a breeze coming from the open fields gave them some relief from the heat. The trees gave the house and the porch plenty of shade. With even more flowers in bloom, the garden looked lush and beautiful.

"We should weed it," Wendy decided, eyeing it critically after she admired the flowers.

"It's not always going to be summer. We should enjoy ourselves as much as we can," Duncan told her.

Wendy nodded, seeing the wisdom in that. They went up the steps and inside. With the blinds down, the dark interior was cool even if it was a little stuffy. As they all pitched in opening the blinds, the house brightened and transformed with sunshine coming in, slanting from the west. The house seemed almost lived in this time. Patrick felt like they had just left it, and it stood waiting for them to return.

They put away the food except for what they were having for dinner and the watermelon. Afterward, they decided to go out for a walk. Before leaving, Wendy ran to get something. It was the heart rock she found last time.

"Why did you bring it back?" Patrick asked.

"To visit. Rocks can visit places too. It's not weird," she insisted as she put it in her pocket. Patrick had to laugh at her a little.

"I think it's nice," Duncan told her.

While Wendy was in the bathroom, Patrick poked his head into Duncan's room. Seeing Duncan looking at him, Patrick explained.

"I'm memorizing the layout for when I sneak in here tonight. I don't want to bump into any furniture."

"I'll keep a light on for you," Duncan told him. They kissed for a little bit, buzzing with anticipation. Too bad it was hours before bedtime.

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Afternoon was turning into early evening. As the light changed, they walked into the open fields. The outlines of clouds on the western horizon were turning orange as the sun got lower, but in the other direction, the clouds looked dark gray and threatening.

"We might get some rain," Duncan said noticing that the clouds were moving closer.

"No," Wendy said like she was not going to allow that.

Despite her protests, they could see the clouds pushed by a high wind. They only felt a pleasant breeze that stirred the grass and their clothes. Though he didn't want to, Duncan remembered his evening walks with Jason. Restless, Jason would look around for something that wasn't there. To Duncan, that seemed like a long time ago. Next to him, Patrick gazed contentedly into the horizon just starting to glow. Then he turned his blue eyed gaze at Duncan and smiled like a man who knew where he belonged and who only wanted what was right in front of him and nothing more.

By the time they got back to the house, rain was a sure thing. Sinking low, the sun was still shining, casting strange, elongated shadows. Above, the sky was so dark it was like someone had put a lid on the world. Wendy was frowning at it even before it started raining. When the first raindrops fell, she shook her head in disapproval.

"Oh, no. Everything looks sad in the rain," she said, looking through the window at the garden.

"I kind of like it," Duncan said. He liked the patter of rain, the smell but also how the color washed out of the world. This evening, the colors were burnished as the setting sun snuck its last rays under the clouds.

"Gloomy, gloomy," Wendy said as she poked his side, making him smile.

Right above the horizon, they saw lightning cut through the sky.

Distant thunder gave a long, low rumble. While looking out the window, Wendy put her hand on the glass like she wanted to stop the rain from falling. Seeing how much Wendy disliked the rain, Duncan turned on some music. Wendy quickly substituted her own and made him and Patrick dance. Then she accused Patrick, "You dance just like Dad."

"I do not," Patrick said as she abandoned him to go and dance with Duncan.

"He does," she said to Duncan. "Mom said Dad's dancing was only good for laughs." Noticing that Duncan's dancing wasn't to her liking either, she instructed him. "You need to move around more. You're just shifting. That's not dancing."

"Maybe he only knows how to dance with guys," Patrick said, and started to make some moves toward Duncan.

To save himself from whatever Patrick had in mind, Duncan went to get some snacks. When he got back, Patrick was waiting for him with open arms. Duncan put down the food and went up to Patrick. They slow danced as Wendy twirled around them.

Afterward they went to sit on the porch to cool off. The smell of the rain perfumed the air. With the clouds covering the sky, the world was dark. Even the lights of the town seemed muted by the rain in the distance. The edges of clouds were silvery with moonlight. As the rain slowed then stopped, they could hear the rustling of small creatures of the night. After a lull, it started to rain again. Wendy grumbled, but Patrick pointed out that it was her bedtime anyway.

Once she was in bed, Patrick and Duncan moved to the east side of the porch so they wouldn't disturb her. Leaning on the railing, Patrick put out his hand and rain drops beaded his skin.

"You're ready to become a fan of rainy weather," Duncan said to him.

Patrick smiled at him wickedly.

"I only need to fuck you in the rain one time to be a fan for life," he said.

"You are relentless."

"You are irresistible," Patrick claimed.

"Plenty of people have resisted me just fine."

"Then you must have special power over me," Patrick said as he looked into Duncan's eyes.

Breaking eye contact, Duncan's gaze moved down Patrick's body, from his powerful chest in a comfortable t-shirt to the jeans loose over his toned legs. Duncan had mentally stripped him and could only see

what was underneath his clothes.

"Keep looking at me like that, and I'm going to drag you into the bushes and fuck the hell out if you," Patrick said. To show him he wasn't bluffing, he pulled out condoms and lube from his pocket. That only gave Duncan further motive to ogle him.

Gaze locked on Duncan, Patrick crossed the distance between them in two purposeful steps. With a predatory lunge, he had Duncan trapped in his arms. Immediately, Duncan felt his cock stand up like it had been commanded and had to obey. Patrick's thorough kiss made him even harder.

"Now you've done it," Patrick told him.

Seeing Patrick's eyes searching the garden, right away Duncan knew where to lead him. As they walked away from the porch light, he and Patrick were only shadows. Duncan stopped deep in the garden. Turning to him, Patrick followed his gaze. As soon as he saw that secluded spot surrounded by thick greenery, he took Duncan's hand. They walked together between low hanging branches they had to brush out of their way. The space was almost completely enclosed but open above. Looking up, they could see the cloudy, night sky framed by leafy branches and the rain coming down. They were hidden, but they weren't too far from the house. From there they could keep am eye on it and Wendy.

They kissed hungrily, dragging each other to the ground. Duncan's knees hit the wet grass then Patrick was on top of him. Under them, the ground was soft and fragrant with fallen leaves. As rain trickled down their faces, they tasted it in their kiss. Duncan kissed Patrick's strong jaw then his neck, savoring the feel, the taste, the warmth of his skin. In return, Patrick's kisses were forceful and deep, pressing him into the ground. His passion was so powerful. Duncan could feel it in every inch of his body not just in the hard cock pressing into his hip.

Rain dripped through the branches. Gathered by the leaves, it fell in heavy drops. The grass was wet and cool while they were overheated, struggling with each others clothes. They couldn't get naked here. They just needed a little skin, enough room to slip their hands in and free each others cocks.

Duncan got the upper hand and rolled Patrick onto his back. As he leaned over him, hard flesh damp from the rain slid into the heat of his mouth. His free hand unbuckled his own belt and his jeans. He let them drop low on his hips. His other hand cradled and caressed Patrick’s balls while he sucked. But not for long. He got off Patrick and yanked his own jeans down off his ass. He turned away and

leaned down with his elbows in the grass. Patrick prepped him quickly. While Patrick fingered him with well lubed fingers, his other hand was restless all over Duncan's body. He was rubbing his ass, his back, tangling his fingers through his hair, caressing the rock hard length of his cock.

Patrick fucked him fast and hard then slow, making every inch count. Duncan only grunted, his hands clutching at clumps of grass, his forehead in the dirt.

"On your back," Patrick told him as he pulled out.

Duncan looked over his shoulder at him then turned over.

"Always getting your way," Duncan said.

Grabbing hold of his jeans, he pulled Duncan's legs up.

"I like those eyes and how they look at me," Patrick said, chest heaving. Breathless with anticipation, he pushed in, pressing down on the backs of Duncan's thighs at the same time. Duncan gasped and panted. He looked up at the treetops and the sky then back at Patrick. Knowing that was his signal, Patrick thrust deeper. Duncan stifled a moan, and Patrick reached between his legs to stroke him. Duncan stilled his hand with his own and shook his head.

"I like it, but I don't need it," he said, and Patrick knew to give him more of his cock instead. That was what he needed and wanted. He wanted more of Patrick, all of him, every last thick, hard inch. Patrick was happy to give it to him. In to the hilt, he ran his hand over the exposed part of Duncan's legs then angled his body so he could pound Duncan properly. The wet grass under his knees gave him a little trouble. It was slippery, but it was all good once Duncan grabbed his own legs. His position was just right for Patrick to anchor himself and fuck with abandon. Duncan came bucking under him, gripping Patrick so he didn't dislodge him as he went wild from pleasure.

Patrick lowered his head, Duncan raised himself up, and they kissed as Patrick came, moaning Duncan's name in a hoarse whisper. As they collapsed, they could hear the patter of rain on the leaves. Duncan loved the sound of rain even more now.

*

The rain was quiet now, only a whisper. Patrick could only hear it after his heart stopped beating so fast and hard. He and Duncan lay together wet from the rain and spent. Below them was the earthy scent of old leaves and the fresh scent of the grass they had trampled. Above them, it was dark, still drizzling.

Leaning on each other like two drunks, they stumbled back to the

house. As they walked up the porch steps, Patrick noticed the state Duncan was in.

"Look what a mess I made if you. You have leaves in your hair. Grass is all stuck to you," Patrick said, relishing the sight of all the evidence that he had just had this man.

As if to prove he wasn't in such great shape either, Duncan reached over and brushed a leaf out of his hair. Then he let his hand linger, playing with Patrick's damp hair. Patrick loved moments like these with affectionate gestures that touched the tender places inside him. Duncan's gentle fingers might as well have been playing over his heart.

Sneaking back into the dark, quiet house, they immediately started kissing. They didn't want to let go of each other and go their separate ways. They wanted to keep tasting each other. Their bodies were locked together, muscle against muscle, like they were trying to merge into one being. Still damp but not caring, they dropped onto the office couch. Mauling each other, they made out like teenagers. Patrick exhausted himself into a heavy sleep right there as Duncan held him.

Chapter 21

As he watched dawn break, Duncan listened to Patrick's breathing slow down. Patrick finally fell asleep after a wonderful, sleepless night. Duncan loved the relaxed weight of his body in sleep. It was an intimate feeling, a privilege of lovers. That evening, Duncan had been sure he and Patrick wouldn't be able to stay in their own bedrooms until morning with temptation waiting just down the hall. He hadn't anticipated that they would stay up all night like this, with the pale light of dawn letting them know that they had spent the night together. Duncan didn't even feel tired. He felt like he could stay awake every night of his life in Patrick's arms.

An hour later, Duncan felt Patrick burrow into him not wanting to wake up. He muttered sleepily into Duncan's shoulder as he shook him awake. Duncan was sorry to have to send him to his own bed, but he didn't want Wendy finding them curled up together, messy from their garden fuck.

Duncan didn't go to sleep. He didn't need it. He only needed Patrick to renew him and make him feel alive.

When she got up a little later, Wendy was relieved to see that there was no trace of the clouds from last night's rain. She smiled at the clear blue sky with approval. She pointed up and said, "No more rain!" It was an order.

Duncan showed her that he had everything ready to make french toast for breakfast, and she was delighted. Before she could race off to wake up Patrick, Duncan stopped her. He bribed her with an early slice so she would let Patrick sleep late. He told her he needed her to taste test it for him. The smell of french toast frying got Patrick out of bed anyway.

After breakfast, Wendy couldn't wait to go exploring.

"Can't we just stay here, put our feet up, and enjoy the view?" Patrick asked. Not having gotten enough sleep, he just wanted to laze around.

Duncan sympathized, but Wendy threatened him with chores. That got Patrick moving. He dragged his feet, but it was mostly for show.

"This is the bluest sky I've ever seen," Wendy said, looking up.

The sky was very blue with clouds so wispy they looked like they were drawn on the sky with a feather. Wendy picked a direction, and they just walked, aimless and happy to be together. Patrick and

Duncan walked with their arms around each other. With the arrival of full on summer, it was like everything was overlaid with gold. Cicadas sang their tune and dragonflies perched on the tips of long blades of grass. Along the way a bush with blue flowers had a lot of bees buzzing around it. One stray bee was taking too much interest in Wendy. She started flailing around.

"A bee," she squealed.

"Don't swat at it, or it might bite you," Patrick warned her.

"There, it's gone," Duncan said as the bee flew away with a little encouragement from him.

"Thanks for saving me," she said and gave him a hug.

"That's what friends are for."

"You're not just a friend any more, you're Patrick's boyfriend," Wendy reminded him.

"Yes, he is," Patrick confirmed and kissed him.

"Finally," Duncan said, acknowledging that he had made things difficult. But what mattered was that they were together and that they loved each other. Duncan felt so good with that knowledge in his heart.

Wendy drew their attention to a distant house behind a fence. There was a barn as well as some fields that were being cultivated.

"Is that a real farm?" Wendy asked.

"It is, but I'm not sure what they grow." Duncan then pointed in a slightly different direction toward a group of white buildings. "That's where they make the honey," Duncan told them.

"Did the bee that was chasing me come from there?" Wendy asked.

"Maybe," Duncan told her.

Fences blocked their path further on. Circling so they would cover new ground on the way back, they chose a path that would eventually take them back home. They could see a family was picnicking in a field, but they were far away. Wendy waved to them, and a small boy waved back.

"We have to have a picnic," Wendy said, sounding jealous.

Duncan agreed with her. It was well past lunchtime. As they discussed the picnic menu, they headed back to the house.

They decided to have their picnic under that big tree on the small hill. Wendy practically marched up there, a blanket under her arm. She was wearing shorts, and now she was ready for that tree. She eyed it all through lunch then started to climb as soon as she was done

eating.

"Please be careful," Duncan said as she grabbed onto a branch to hoist herself up.

Seeing that Duncan didn't take his eyes off her, Patrick laughed at him. But he was watching her carefully too, and both of them stood ready to catch her. Once she had her fill of climbing, Wendy rejoined them on the ground. Duncan breathed a sigh of relief. Patrick shook his head then got comfortable on the blanket. He was asleep as soon as he closed his eyes. Wendy was dismayed, but Duncan knew he needed to catch up on some sleep.

The canopy of the big tree spread out like a giant umbrella giving them cool shade. All around the sun shone so brightly like it was bathing everything in gold fire, even the air. The fields were vibrant green and gold at the feathery tips. Dragonflies streaked low over the grass. They lay back watching the world around them shimmer as birds and cicadas sang to them. Wendy was calling out the shapes she saw in the clouds passing overhead. Duncan worried that she would wake Patrick, but he didn't even stir.

When Wendy got restless, Duncan took her on a walk so Patrick could keep sleeping. By the time they got back, Patrick was awake and the sun was ready to set. They had a good view of it. Duncan sat next to him so they could enjoy it together. Cradling each other, they watched the fiery sunset while nearby Wendy watched the birds that chased each other in the branches of the big tree.

*

Patrick was glad he got some sleep. That way he could look forward to tonight's action. Wendy was getting ready to go to bed. Patrick was already ogling Duncan, picturing every inch of him naked.

"You keep looking so fuckable, and I'll sneak into your bedroom and make a mess of you all over again," he warned Duncan.

"Don't say it if you don't mean it," Duncan told him. "I don't want to spend a sleepless night for nothing."

Patrick liked hearing that, but he had something even better in mind.

"I wouldn't have to sneak if we shared the same room," Patrick said. "Would you really rather wake up alone than with me?"

"You know the answer."

"Me too, and not just for tonight, forever." Patrick knew that for the

rest of his life he wanted to wake up with Duncan by his side.

Just then Wendy came out of her room to say goodnight.

"Wendy, is it OK if Duncan and I share the same room?" Patrick asked her.

"Patrick," Duncan said with a frown. She was the reason Duncan wanted them to have separate rooms.

Wendy grew thoughtful.

"It's OK. You're adults. It's fine," she decided.

Patrick grinned at Duncan though he obviously didn't approve of how Patrick had addressed and neutralized his objection.

"But you better hurry up and make it legal," she added, startling Duncan.

Of course Patrick was in complete agreement with her as was Duncan deep down in his heart.

All night in bed with Duncan was such an impossible luxury. Patrick couldn't help but maul Duncan as soon as they got in the room. They locked the door, pulled back the covers and took off their clothes.

Meeting in the center of the bed, they kissed. Gliding over his skin, the palm of Duncan's hand was leaving a hot trail. Patrick hardened instantly under the lightest touch of his fingers. Seeing the state he was in, Duncan smiled. But he wasn't in the mood for making Patrick wait. The pressure of his hands was firm, not teasing. While groping Patrick, he pushed him onto his back. Placing both hands on his chest, Duncan straddled him. As he played with his nipples, he leaned down and kissed Patrick for a long time. When he was ready, he impaled himself on Patrick's cock. It was an almost dizzying sensation as Patrick felt his cock sheathed in Duncan's body. Patrick loved that moment when he could feel a lover truly take ownership of him, when his touch turned from tentative to possessive. Running his hands over Duncan's thighs, he felt his muscles flex as he rode him. He raised and lowered himself in one fluid, rolling motion that pushed Patrick higher and higher. Patrick didn't know where his body ended. It continued through Duncan's, reaching deeper into him all the time.

Only for a moment, Duncan leaned over and kissed Patrick's mouth. Beads of perspiration were on Duncan's skin as he went back to riding him harder than before. His breath was ragged, his voice hoarse when he said, "Now." Duncan came throwing his head back, spilling over Patrick's chest. Duncan's beautiful eyes opened, and he looked down just in time to watch Patrick come. Calling his name, Patrick raised his head for a kiss.

Afterward, it was so good to be in the same bed with Duncan. Sweat drenched and satisfied, Patrick had never felt so good in anyone's arms. He didn't want to go to sleep. Two pillows, two heads on the pillows, two sets of eyes gazing at each other, it was perfect.

Chapter 22

It was early morning with pearly gray light barely breaking through the blinds. After not getting any sleep the night before, last night Duncan had quickly fallen asleep while Patrick's hand smoothed through his hair. With what they shared fresh and real, still infusing his body, Duncan felt like he was falling into a bottomless lake.

The first thing he saw when he woke up was Patrick's sleeping face. Opening his eyes to him wasn't like waking. It was like opening his eyes to a dream. Duncan kissed him softly though he didn't mean to wake him. Patrick's arm wrapped around him tighter, and he murmured sleepily in his ear. Duncan thought he would go back to sleep, but he felt Patrick caressing him. Patrick's hands lazily roamed his body though he didn't seem to be fully awake. He found Duncan's mouth with eyes closed by gliding his lips over his face. Then his mouth opened against Duncan's and Patrick came fully awake kissing him deeply and aggressively, demanding the same in return. Duncan gave it to him, lifting his whole body to meet Patrick's, wanting to satisfy his need even more than his own.

"You're more beautiful than even the most beautiful dream," Duncan told him.

Patrick moaned as Duncan turned him then slid down his body. He loved making him feel good.

Afterward, Patrick didn't want to let him go. It was tempting to stay locked up in those strong arms, pressed against that warm, muscular body. Somehow, Duncan managed to escape him. Eyes half closed, yawning, hair unruly from sleep, Patrick was a beautiful sight. He gave Duncan a lopsided grin and tried to pull him back into bed, but Duncan sidestepped the muscular arm reaching for him.

"Go back to sleep," Duncan told him and kissed his sleepy eyes.

*

Patrick woke up to birds singing and sun streaming through the blinds. He smiled at first then groaned at not having Duncan in bed with him. After he got himself out of bed and ready, he went to the kitchen led there by the smell of coffee. Wendy was there, looking out the window. Patrick could hear the birds again.

"I think those birds are singing just for me," Patrick said as he kissed Wendy good morning.

"Birds don't sing for you. They sing because that's how they talk," Wendy lectured.

"Am I allowed to enjoy it?" Patrick asked.

"Yes. But don't try to take credit," Wendy told him. Then she looked thoughtful. "I wish I could take credit."

"For the birds?"

"No. For Duncan. He went running," she informed him then explained. "I wanted to find you a really good boyfriend, but you're the one who found Duncan."

Patrick thought about it.

"Remember when we were looking for a new apartment? You know how we almost picked that other place where the rent was lower?" It was a little bigger, but the neighborhood wasn't as nice.

"And then I saw that sign that said Flounder's," Wendy said.

Patrick hadn't even noticed the small sign. He didn't think much of it until he found out Flounder's was a basement bar that didn't have a great reputation. It was fine for Patrick to live near a place like that, but not when he had Wendy to consider. He was very glad she pointed out the sign to him.

"That's why we got the apartment in Duncan's building. So you get credit."

"I don't know," she said shaking her head at him.

"OK. We can share the credit," Patrick told her. He knew that she still felt bad for rejecting Duncan as a boyfriend prospect. She was such a funny kid, but she just wanted the best for him. Patrick pulled her into a hug and kissed the top of her head.

*

Even with Patrick distracting him, Duncan got up for his run early enough to avoid the heat. He was still completely drenched by the time he circled back to the house. As the house came into view, Duncan found himself smiling at the sight of it. More and more the house looked to him the way it did when he first saw it. Now that he was making new memories here, the place looked perfect to him again. All the cobwebs that had overlaid his vision were clearing. The house was beautiful especially with Patrick standing on the porch, holding a cup of coffee.

"It's too hot to run," Patrick told him.

"I have to stay in shape." He gave Patrick a significant look.

"It's working," Patrick said, admiring him from head to toe. "But

why didn't you keep me awake? We could have gone together."

"Because I went for a run not a race. You're too competitive."

"You old guys are such a pain."

"In that case, it's your turn to make breakfast," Duncan told him.

By the time Duncan got out of the shower, he saw that Patrick had three bowls with cereal ready. Wendy was frowning at them.

"The morning is already so hot. We don't want to start with a hot breakfast," Duncan told her.

Patrick gave him a big smile and a kiss for that.

The day before had been hot. Today was even hotter, but that didn't keep them inside. They set off for a walk slowly and headed toward the pond. The light breeze only seemed to push the heat around. The edges of the pond had cattails growing and tall marshy grasses. The cicadas were going crazy. Their noise was incessant.

"It's soooo hot," Wendy lamented.

"Let's take a dip in the pond," Patrick joked.

"No! It's scummy."

"We can cool off in the creek," Duncan said. "There is more shade over there too."

It didn't take them long to reach the shelter of the trees that grew around the creek. As soon as they reached a small copse of trees, Wendy sighed with relief.

"Much better," Wendy said as she plopped down in the grass. She didn't stay down long, only until she cooled off a little. Every time they walked up the creek, she wanted to go further than before. After a while they reached a new spot. There was a patch of sunlight where the trees opened up. The sunbeams hit the water and made it glint. Wendy leaned over the water.

"Are there any fish?" she asked.

"I've only seen very small ones. Maybe there are some bigger ones in the pond."

Some big rocks edged the water, and Wendy perched on one of them, still looking for fish.

"Watch it over there," Patrick told her. "You're scaring Duncan."

"Don't worry, Duncan. I'm being careful," she told him sweetly.

Wendy took off her sandals and stuck her feet in the water to cool off. She said, "Aahh, it's nice. It's really cold."

The big trees gave them good shade for a while. As they walked up the creek further than ever before, the big trees thinned out. Now they

had a clear view. Hills in the distance were so pale, they looked translucent. The clouds seemed more solid. Pure white, they looked like they had boiled up from the horizon then solidified.

*

Leaving the big trees behind, they were now walking in an open field that was marked by a fence. They could see a few farmhouses in the distance, and they were closer to the silos that could be seen from the house. Patrick turned to try and figure out where the house was from there. Duncan pointed it out.

"It looks small," Wendy said. "But it's a nice house. It gives you a good feeling like listening to music or eating pie with whipped cream."

"Are you hungry?" Patrick asked her.

"Yes."

"If we cut across here, there is a small restaurant, Bonita's. They have homemade ice cream."

Wendy's eyes widened eagerly.

"She's not interested," Patrick joked.

"I am very interested," she said to Patrick then she turned to Duncan. "Can you make homemade ice cream?"

"Of course he can. Duncan can do anything," Patrick mocked them both.

Duncan stared at him for a bit then answered Wendy's question.

"I can. We'll get an ice cream maker from the store."

"Yes!"

After thinking for a minute, Duncan said, "We don't need an ice cream maker to make fruit sorbet. There should be some fruit stands along the road. We'll get some fruit after we have the homemade ice cream at Bonita's."

"I want lunch with my ice cream," Patrick demanded. "A man can't exist on ice cream alone. I need energy for later," he whispered to Duncan.

Duncan nudged him away, but Patrick sidled close again.

"I'm a third wheel!" Wendy said suddenly, seeing how they were looking at each other and messing around.

"No, you aren't," Patrick told her.

"I'm the third wheel, not you," Duncan told her.

"No one is the third wheel," Patrick told both of them.

Duncan made room for Wendy to walk between them.

"I don't want to get between you," she said.

"You're in the middle because you're our heart," Duncan told her.

Wendy gave him a confused smile. Patrick gazed at her and swallowed hard. It was true. She had been his heart ever since Mom and Dad died. She was the keeper of everything good, his whole family. In her little hands, she held for safekeeping his sanity and his hope for better days. And now Duncan saw her the same way. Patrick looked from his little sister to Duncan. How much brighter his eyes were than the day Patrick met him. The love that had been overlaid with sadness shone clearly from his heart now. A more beautiful man didn't exist.

"Ice cream?" Wendy reminded them since they were lost in each other. She walked ahead of them, exasperated.

After lunch they visited the fruit stands. Loaded down with fresh fruit and vegetables, they headed back to the house.

*

That evening Patrick found Duncan standing in the garden looking at the house.

"Still trying to say goodbye to this place?" Patrick asked, seeing how he gazed from the porch up to the roof.

"This house seemed so right. That's why I bought it. Then everything went wrong in it," Duncan said as his eyes became unfocused for a moment.

"You bought the right house then picked the wrong guy. You have the right guy now. As for the house, it's great, but if all you're using it for is storing bad memories, you should sell it," Patrick told him.

"This weekend I'm using it to entertain my boyfriend and his little sister so I better hang on to it," Duncan said with a smile.

"You're not selling?"

"You guys brought happiness back to this place. When I'm here with you, I can't imagine giving up this house."

"That hidden spot in the garden especially." Patrick smirked.

That was so true. Every place they touched or kissed or just walked together was precious to him.

"The house is like your heart, you just have to share it with the right person, and it will be all right again," Patrick said.

His words made Duncan realize that he was all right. He wasn't

wounded any more. He was whole and healed. That meant he was free to give his whole heart to anyone he wanted.

"I'm starting to see this house the way I used to. I loved this place. Now I'm starting to love it again," Duncan said as he came to a decision.

"That's great. You belong here," Patrick said, happy for him.

"I was thinking the same thing about you and Wendy."

"Is that your way of asking us to visit more?"

"I'm asking you to move in."

Patrick rushed into his arms and kissed him. Patrick's kiss always made every feeling Duncan had for him burn brighter. This time it almost knocked him off his feet. Breaking off their kiss, Patrick hugged him tightly. In his embrace, Duncan imagined spending the summer here instead of in those two apartments. He could picture Christmas, snow outside, the Christmas tree glowing in the window. He wanted to give Patrick and Wendy a home. He wanted to give them the whole world. Patrick stepped back to gaze at him.

"Look at you making a leap. I guess now it's my turn. Hang on a second," Patrick said. He ran up the porch steps and poked his head into the house. "Hey, Wendy, is it OK if I ask Duncan to marry me?" Patrick asked her.

At first Wendy looked stunned, then she said, "Hurry up and do it!"

"I think that's her way of saying yes," Patrick said.

"Hurry up!" she yelled at him, then she closed the door in his face.

"I guess we're doing it out here," Patrick said.

And why not? It was a beautiful spot. They were in the shade, and the garden was fragrant all around them. It was hot, but a steady breeze stirred the leaves. Patrick held both of Duncan's hands. For a while, he didn't say anything.

"I haven't been rehearsing this only because I was trying to be good and not rush things. But I want to do it right," Patrick said. His hands were shaking a little. He was so heartbreakingly nervous.

"There is no wrong way to do it," Duncan told him then he gulped.

Patrick noticed.

"Oh, good. You're nervous too. We're on the same page. Here goes. Duncan, will you marry me and make me incredibly happy?"

"Yes. But I wanted to ask," Duncan admitted.

"Don't get competitive," Patrick said before he pulled Duncan into a kiss. Both of them were shaking and laughing and still trying to keep kissing. Duncan felt like he was only standing because Patrick was

holding him. He didn't want him to ever let go.

"I'm sorry I came with so much baggage. I didn't make it easy on you," Duncan said.

"I'm sorry you had to go through those bad experiences. The way I see it, life had to clear those jerks out of the way one way or the other so you would be free when I came along."

Duncan had to laugh.

"So you think we can make a happy home together," he asked Patrick. They were still holding each other.

"We already do. But I want to make it official. I want a piece of paper, and I want to wear a ring for the rest of my life that says I'm yours completely and you're mine, and other guys better keep their hands off," Patrick said as he caressed his face. They both had tears in their eyes.

"I just want to love you and be with you. And I want you to know you don't have to prove anything to me," Duncan told him. He felt like they were already one.

"I'll prove it anyway," Patrick said.

Hand in hand, they went back in together to tell Wendy. They found her waiting, squirming in place. Her eyes were wide, and she looked ready to cry.

"Easy there," Patrick told her. "He said yes."

She ran at them and opened her arms. They both wrapped her in a big hug.

"I'm so happy," she squealed, both tearful and overjoyed. "When you're married, Duncan is going to be in our family right? Forever?" she said looking up at them.

"Yes," Patrick told her.

Duncan found himself too overcome to speak. Wendy was overwhelmed for a moment and looked like she was definitely going to cry.

"Don't cry," Patrick said to her and hugged her tighter.

"I won't. OK. I might cry just a little," she said as her eyes shone with happy tears.

"A little is fine, but don't overdo it," Patrick said.

"It's going to be a great gay wedding!" Wendy predicted.

"You'll help us plan it?" Duncan asked, finally trusting himself to speak now that Wendy wasn't so teary eyed.

"Yes. I'll do everything. It will be perfect."

They laughed at her enthusiasm, all of them with tears in their eyes.

Then Duncan remembered the other news.

"And we're all going to live in this house," he told her.

"Really," she said surprised. "You're not going to sell it?"

"No, I like it too much."

"Me too," Wendy said. "We're going to be so happy!"

"This is the beginning of our forever," Patrick said, looking into Duncan's eyes.

Wendy looked at them and did her best not to cry.

That night Patrick and Duncan were standing in their bedroom, gazing into each other's eyes. Duncan felt like he was finally living his dream.

"You're going to be my husband," Patrick said and then practically attacked Duncan.

He expected Patrick would be calmer now that they were engaged, but he was crazed with lust. Patrick stripped him, kissed him quick and hard on the mouth whenever he got a chance. He kissed him everywhere else too. Duncan was maddened by his rough hands undressing him. His mouth was everywhere, his tongue hot on his skin. Then Patrick was down on his knees, taking him into his mouth. Duncan's hand rested gently against the side of his face as he sucked. He was feeling the motion of Patrick's head and moaning.

"Husband," Duncan said and smiled at that sweet word. He felt Patrick suck even harder.

With Patrick's insatiable feelings setting the pace, they didn't stop for a long time. It was as if Patrick wanted to unleash all his feelings at once. They had a lifetime to show each other their love, but he couldn't wait. Finally, they fell together, exhausted. Trying to catch their breaths, they caressed each other with slow, calming movements over slick, hot flesh.

"So how scary was it for you?" Patrick asked. He was eyeing Duncan, looking for any trace of doubt or fear.

"You were a beast. I didn't think I'd get out alive," Duncan said, pretending to misunderstand him.

"The proposal," Patrick told him.

Now Duncan answered seriously.

"It was like being scared to fall and then finding a soft landing. What about you? You want to do this with me forever?" Duncan asked as they lay wrapped around each other.

"This and everything," Patrick said.

"I'll be the only, the last man you ever sleep with."

Duncan watched Patrick's smile widen at the prospect.

"Do you promise?" Patrick said.

They kissed while Duncan tangled his fingers in Patrick's hair.

"How good does this feel," Patrick said. He held Duncan tightly as they were ready to go to sleep in their bed, in their new home.

Duncan kissed Patrick then he said, "I love you, and I want to share a bed with you till the end of time."

"You don't know that, maybe I'll start kicking in my sleep or stealing the covers."

"Even if you do, I'll still want to sleep with you," Duncan vowed then closed his eyes.

That's when Patrick decided to speak up.

"Hey, Duncan, I love you."

"Why did you wait till I closed my eyes?"

"Just practicing. I'm going to whisper those words every morning and watch you wake up to them," Patrick said, smiling at him.

"I wake up before you do so I'm stealing your idea."

"Hey," Patrick said with a laugh as Duncan kissed him again.

"Go to sleep so I can wake you up by saying 'Patrick, I love you.'"

They kissed sleepily, with their eyes closed until they drifted off, dreaming of each other, whispering, "I love you" in their sleep.

The end

Also by Trina Solet:

~And Manny Makes Three - Mark is a struggling college student who has been working as a nanny for a nice family, but they don't need him any more. Zack has been raising his son, Al, by himself and needs help. Al is a funny kid, and Zack is a funny dad, but more serious issues lurk under the surface. Will Mark be able to deal with these two? And how will Zack and Mark deal with their mutual attraction?

~Unexpected Dad - Tyler finds a big surprise waiting on his doorstep. Ready or not, Tyler is a dad. Tyler didn't know he had a daughter until she suddenly dropped into his life. Whether he is ready for her or not, little Julie needs a father. Or maybe two. Tyler and Jake have been best friends, inseparable since college. Now they have to adjust to Tyler's new role as a dad. As Jake helps him cope with

being a new father to a little girl, Tyler might be looking at two big changes in his life.

~More Than a Manny - A very young, rich widower needs a nanny, but a hot manny would be even better. That's where Nate comes in. Brent is a loving but irresponsible father to two young children from a marriage of convenience. He needs Nate in his life, but how will Nate, a first time nanny, fit into his unconventional household? The kids are a handful, especially little Georgie. Her big brother, Ricky, has a few issues of his own. But Nate is more than ready to take on the challenge and let all three of them steal his heart.

~His True Home - Alec has retreated to his childhood home after a life of too much fun. When a little boy is abandoned on the road leading to Alec's home town of Seaview Pines, Alec is the one who ends up taking care of him. Now Cory is on his way to join them. He was abandoned by his mother as well and wants to give Teddy, his little brother, the family he never had. As they spend time together, it's up to Cory to draw out the serious, silent little boy. He also has to convince Alec that his home town isn't just a temporary refuge. It's where all three of them belong.

~Poison Heart - Is there anything Vince and Cal won't do for each other? The two of them grew up together and fell deeply in love. They were poor but happy until Cal made a big mistake and ended up in jail. He did it for Vince. To get him out, Vince is willing to do anything. Roland Granger has the power and influence to make Cal a free man. All he wants in return is Vince. Even if Cal never forgives him, Vince is willing to sacrifice himself. Now he has to make sure that Cal accepts this unwanted help. And while Vince is trying to set things right in his own life, can he reunite Roland with a self-destructive young man who loves him?

~Make It Better - A favor leads to a life changing experience. Ray is willing to do anything for the man he considers his savior. His mission of mercy is Marcus, a young man who can’t overcome his guilt over a tragedy in his past. Is Ray making a terrible mistake giving his heart to him, or will his love for Marcus be strong enough to save him?

~My Love Is Real: The Benson Brothers Story - For almost a year Sean and Brian thought they were brothers. Sean wants him more than anything, but will Brian ever accept his love? His pride is only one of the obstacles standing in their way. A dangerous man has a claim on Brian.

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